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TREVOR LORDSHIP

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TORONTO

TREVOR LORDSHIP

BY

MRS. HUBERT BARCLAY

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TREVOR LORDSHIP

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CHAPTER I

NIGHT THOUGHTS

"Il est plus aise d'estre sage pour les autres, que de l'estre pour soy-meme."

— La Rochefoucauld.

It was a beautiful night in midsummer. The scent of the night-stock stole in through the open window, an incense to the worship of Nature in her most soothing mood. Now and again, some slight sound arose which seemed to emphasize rather than disturb the silence, or a faint breath, too slight to be termed a breeze, would shake the leaves in a dim arpeggio of sound, like low music in the distance.

It seemed as if the stillness itself was audible, as if, under the mantle of quiet and peace, there was a faint murmur, more a sense than an actuality, as of the forces of Nature at work, rearranging, reproducing, marshalling her forces to meet the morning; a sense of that never ending re-creation, of which we are ever sensible at the dawn of a new day. It is only when we are very young that we imagine that

the earth sleeps as well as we; later on, we realize that the night is for Dame Nature her hour of work, — of peace, yes, but peace which gives opportunity to prepare anew her daily transformation scene, and to stage her tableaux afresh.

A few clouds were drifting over the face of the moon, and one or two heavy drops fell, as if the skies wept that Earth's time of quiet was so short; but the woman who was seated before the open window did not move. She was leaning forward, her hands lightly clasped on a small table in front of her, her eyes gazing into the night. It was evident that she saw nothing, and that her thoughts were far away.

Under her hands lay a mass of letters, a few pieces of faded ribbon with which they had been tied, and, like a blot upon the white table-cloth, a little dry, flat mass of brown, which exhaled a faint scent of violets.

Eleanor Russell was a tall woman, built on rather massive lines. She was dressed in deep mourning, and this, even in the dim light of two candles, accentuated the pallor of her face, and seemed to take all the tone out of her hair, leaving it ashen and colourless. She looked worn and tired; but, had any critical observer been present, they would have been struck by the steadfast quiet of her eyes, which were really beautiful, although just now dimmed with exhaustion resulting from a long strain. Their expres-

sion suggested a calm strength at variance with the fatigue of her appearance, an almost startling distinction between the mental and physical conditions, denoting either a spirit so controlled as to be beyond the reach of bodily influence, or, to use Dr. Johnson's expression, "a stark insensibility."

But to accuse Eleanor Russell of insensibility in this sense would be far from just, and to apply the former hypothesis, a little more than her due; her state of mind was a compound of both.

Life had not, so far, treated her with much kindness; her circumstances had been such as necessitated the relegating of all personal matters into the background, and the entire subjection of all personal emotion, even in thought. Her youth had passed, almost unheeded in its going, in the daily round, the common task, of attendance upon a dearly loved but fretful invalid mother, who must be sheltered at all costs; and the bearing with, and making the best of, the galling, and sometimes degrading, actions and demands of a father who had in later life retained all the follies natural to, and not always becoming in, a young man. She had, from being a kind of buffer or buttress to those with whom she lived, ceased to consider life from her own standpoint, or in fact to consider herself, or her own wishes at all. When a certain course of action appeared to her clear judgment advisable for those who depended on her, that

course was pursued as a natural and inevitable thing, and gradually and imperceptibly she had ceased to live her own life, it had become merged in that of others.

Her natural unselfishness had, in this way, increased, until it hovered on the causeway which divides a virtue from a vice, and from having been obliged for so long to disregard her own wishes, she had almost ceased to possess any.

Much the same condition may be observed in the vegetable world: when a young tree supports a growth of ivy, it ceases in the end to have any life in itself, and becomes, to all intents and purposes, an ivy tree.

This, however, it must be allowed, was only in its broader sense, and in the larger issues of life. With regard to the trifling details of every day, she was decided, having a clear view of right and wrong, and a clear judgment as to what was wise or unwise.

But at the moment of which I write, Eleanor Russell had begun to realize, albeit vaguely at first, that life was developing the personal side, which had been practically, for her, non-existent for so many years, and it had become necessary that she should think for herself.

Presently she moved a little and began turning over the papers which lay before her, until she found the one she sought. It was a letter, old and faded, dated fifteen years before.

MY VERY DEAR: Before the boat goes, I must just write a few lines to you. It is so hard to part from you, I love you so. But we must not lose hope, Sweet Nell, it cannot, it shall not be for long. When I have made enough money I shall come home at once, and we will be married. Meanwhile, my dear one, in spite of all, we will love each other, and be true — always true. How I love you!

HAL.

She read it through, very much in the way one would read a page of an old familiar book, the words that had once expressed so much had been robbed of their meaning by the years that had passed since they were penned. Her brief sun-time, and the briefer period which had held her love, had been left so very far behind, that it seemed to her almost impossible that it had really been herself, the Eleanor Russell of to-day, who had been "Sweet Nell" to her young lover.

Surely it must have been some one else, some friend perhaps of her girlhood, some other being she had known intimately in days very long ago. A tall and lovely girl who had plighted her troth, in response to the protestations of eager love, which seemed now but a dim recollection.

Eleanor raised the bunch of faded violets from the table. They were very dry and dusty, and she had on more than one occasion considered the advisability of throwing them away; but she had refrained from doing so, not on account of the sentiment they now

held for her, but as one might cherish a possession belonging to some dead relative, whom one had never known personally, but of whom one liked to be reminded. She tried to recall the occasion on which she had received them, but her memory went no further than that they were connected with the day on which he went away. She laid them down, and picked up another letter at random. It was dated ten years later than the first, and began, "My dear Eleanor," and was signed simply, "Yours, H." It was such a letter as a man might write to a sister or a man friend. It attributed previous months of silence to the fact that the writer had been up country where posts were uncertain. He was glad to hear that her mother was pretty well, and hoped that she was the same. With the exception of these two sentences, the letter was entirely impersonal, though well written, and extremely interesting. Descriptions of scenery, native habits, flowers, etc., followed one another in easy, well-chosen language; the story of a local tragedy was told in a few vigorous lines from the pen of a ready writer. The whole epistle was, in short, quite friendly, and quite cool, and was an excellent example of the correspondence which had passed between them during the last seven or eight years; letters which Eleanor had been pleased to receive, and had found easy to answer.

She folded it again after reading it through, and

proceeded to gather the scattered papers into a bundle, tying them together with the faded ribbon — strangely emblematic of the tie which bound her and the writer together. When this was done, it left only two papers on the table, a letter and a telegram. She picked up the first, and read it carefully through, while a little pucker showed itself just between her eyes. It was dated only three months previously, and read as follows: —

MY DEAR ELEANOR: No doubt before this letter reaches you, you will have seen in the papers the announcement of the death of my uncle, Henry Trevor, and will have realized the difference this sad event makes in our future prospects. His only son having been drowned last year, I am his heir. His lawyers inform me that, though not a rich man, he was possessed of a very comfortable income, and this, together with his property, 'Trevor Lordship,' he has left to me, unconditionally.

Although we did not expect that the end of our long period of waiting would come in this way, still I feel that you will agree with me that it has come. I am therefore returning to England as soon as possible. I would ask you to arrange a very early date for our marriage, and to let me know your decision by telegram.

I feel sure that, owing to your being in mourning for your dear mother, you will wish it to be as quiet as possible; this I also should prefer. Having lived so long alone, anything in the nature of a function would be most disagreeable to me. I propose that we should go to 'Trevor Lordship' directly after the wedding, as there will be, of course, a good many arrangements to make. I trust you will have no objection to this, but should you prefer any other course, I beg you will

have no hesitation in telling me. I shall not start until I have heard from you, and shall anxiously await your telegram.

Yours ever,

H. TREVOR.

It will readily be admitted that the recipient of this letter had no other course open to her than to think of herself. There was no doubt it was a very personal matter indeed.

Eleanor rose from her chair, and walked over to the mantelpiece, and took in her hand a photograph which stood there. With this she returned to the table, and seated herself as before. Moving the candles to obtain a better light, she looked at it long and earnestly. It represented a young man with a high forehead and strong, clear-cut features; so far as could be judged from the portrait, he was very tall and slim, and probably athletic. Altogether he was pleasant to look at.

She laid it down after a while, and took up the telegram. The systematic way she had read through each paper was characteristic of her; it seemed as if she were weighing the matter in a balance, and was anxious to be quite fair.

Your father's telegram received. Thank you for arranging July 28th. Shall be with you Wednesday 27th, afternoon.

TREVOR.

Her eyes turned almost unconsciously to the daily calendar which hung beside her bed. It displayed

the date Tuesday, July 26th, and underneath the text, "Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope." Then again she resumed her former position, with her hands clasped in front of her, and her eyes gazing out into the night.

When Henry Trevor's last letter had arrived, she had, in pursuance of her usual custom, handed it to her father. For many years past, her parents had always read her letters; they afforded an agreeable change as a topic of conversation, and any secrecy on her part would have seemed obvious and unusual. She had been utterly unprepared for the excitement into which it had thrown him, and had been swept away on the wave of it. Feeling, as she did, worn out, and almost exhausted with the long strain of nursing her mother, she had been unable to argue with him. He had insisted that the only course open to her was to fix a date at once; indeed, he had done so finally himself. She had said in protest that she hardly liked to arrange matters so quickly, to which he had replied angrily: —

"You are surely not thinking of refusing to marry him?"

"Oh, no!" she had answered, rather shocked at the idea. "Only I should have liked a little more time to think it over."

"Nonsense!" her father had replied; and added, rather coarsely it must be admitted, "You have had

fifteen years to think it over already!" Which was true.

After that she had said no more, and Mr. Russell had made all arrangements in huge delight. He had telegraphed his plans to Henry Trevor, and was highly satisfied with the whole affair. The truth was that, owing to his wife's illness and death, he had been at home for nearly a year, and a prolonged period of domesticity did not suit him. It was, as he put it, "plaguey dull." But if Eleanor had a husband, his responsibilities would cease, the little house could be shut up, and he would be free to adjourn to those circles where a certain gaiety is not considered a demerit, and the tune of life is set in a lighter key. To be honest, village life bored him almost to tears, and the prospect of being free from all family ties was most cheering.

And still Eleanor sat on immovable, wrapped in thought. The main desire of which she was conscious, now that she tried to think what she really did want—was for peace. Peace from the daily, hourly fretting worries of the past year. Her mother was dead, and she missed her,—much in the way, although she did not realize it, that a captive might miss the chains which have dragged heavily on him for a long time. She was feeling very tired, and quite unable to cope with the juvenility and exaltation of her father's humour. She longed for quiet,

for a period of leisure in which she might readjust the balance of her life, which seemed to be seriously disturbed. But she knew that happy time could not be looked for yet, and she passed her hand over her eyes, and buckled on her armour again with a sigh.

He — by this she meant her lover — had been so constant and so true, her whole life could not be sufficient to reward him; she would do her best to make him happy.

She rose from her seat, and began to prepare for bed. Her eyes fell again upon the calendar. "Tribulation worketh patience." "Yes," she thought whimsically, "she had learnt that. Patience she undoubtedly possessed, also, perhaps, the next clause had been passed as a standard in the curriculum; experience of a certain kind she had gained. But, 'Experience worketh hope,' that was something strange," she thought. "In her life the order had been different. Hope had started first, to be overcome by the tribulation, which had in turn worked patience, and the experience of later life did not at present leave much ground for hope!"

CHAPTER II

ENTER — THE BRIDEGROOM

"And Time that gave, doth now his gift confound."
— SHAKESPEARE.

"Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?"
— KEATS.

THE next morning Eleanor was picking roses in her little garden when she heard a voice behind her, and with an exclamation of pleasure she turned to greet a visitor.

A little lady was standing at the gate, — a curious figure, and one that might easily have provoked ridicule in a stranger. She was very short, and very round; she wore on her head an old-fashioned mushroom hat, tied under the chin with wide strings, making a frame in which her cheery face glowed like a rosy apple. Despite her figure, or rather the absence of it, her movements were very quick and very decided, and her general appearance in walking reminded one of a little ball lolling along. Her apparel was always somewhat eccentric: a full skirt short enough to display her thick, serviceable boots, a loose jacket which had once been black, but which time and hard wear had changed to a dingy green; and a

pair of rough gloves of the kind generally associated with "hedgers and ditchers." This was her every-day costume, winter and summer, but on Sundays it was modified; her skirt was longer, the boots thinner, the gloves neater, but the style was always the same. It was a standing joke with the young people that nobody had ever seen Miss Price without her mushroom hat. She ate in it, lived in it, and it was suspected slept in it, although there was no evidence to prove this! She never dined out, early hours were the fashion in the village, and when any one called on her she was invariably in her garden, and her hat!

But anything ridiculous suggested by her appearance was entirely forgotten after a few moments' conversation, for her personality was strong and delightful; humorous, yes! causing merriment intentionally, distinctly caustic at times, but ridiculous — never.

"Good-morning, my dear Eleanor," she said, briskly; "good-morning! Tut, tut, why are your Marie van Houttes always better than mine, thereby causing me to break the Tenth Commandment, and covet my neighbour's goods? Now do let me sit down. I don't generally walk so early in the morning, and the sun is powerful. You are not busy, I hope?"

"No," said Eleanor. "I have plenty of time, and

I am delighted to see you. Come and sit in the shade under the walnut-tree."

They walked across the lawn, and seated themselves, and at once Miss Price began.

"Well, now! tell me all about it. Is everything settled for to-morrow? And did you do as I told you about your dress?"

"Yes," said Eleanor, smiling. "I am going to wear white. It looks quite nice, I think; just a plain coat and skirt, with a lace blouse under it. I don't think you will find fault with it."

"Pouff!" said the lady, scornfully. "Henry Trevor has to thank me that his wife will not appear in church to-morrow in a black cotton frock! And what about the other things?"

"I have not got very much," Eleanor answered. "There has not been much time, and I did not feel quite sure what I should want; so I thought I would wait and buy more later. Mother left me plenty of money for everything."

"You're quite right. Besides, things made in the village here look all right to us, but when we have the opportunity of comparing them elsewhere, they may be far from right. And now, my dear child, I am, as you know, a tiresome old woman; I always have been" (which was quite untrue); "and I am going to give you a little advice. You won't like it, but you will have to put up with it! It is this —

For goodness' sake, cease to be a doormat, and don't lie down for people to wipe their boots on you! Assert yourself, and enjoy yourself, and don't consider other people so much. If you are going to slave for your husband, in the way you have slaved for your parents, Heaven help him! Such a course of treatment would ruin the Archangel Gabriel himself!

"And another thing. You have lived for so many years in this little place — I am not saying anything against it — I love it, and so do you, but affection does not blind me to the fact that it is groovy. We are like the postman's pony doing the same round every day. You will probably feel rather like a fish out of water for a time, and see many things that surprise you, but hold your own, my dear, hold your own. Take your position, whatever it may be, and consider your appearance also, and your clothes. Yes! you may smile, my dear, and look at my hat and my boots, but I'm right. I don't say you have not always looked very nice; you have; but you are going where things may be different, and every man likes to see his wife looking smart. You are young, and good looking; make the most of yourself."

"Dear Miss Price," murmured Eleanor, "I am too old to think of my looks."

"Stuff and nonsense!" retorted the lady. "Not a bit of it! What are you? Thirty-three? Well,

I was thirty-three, five and twenty years ago, and I'm not old yet! Now, I won't bother you any more, but store my words in your memory. They may be useful by and by. Where are you going for your honeymoon?"

"We are not going to have a honeymoon; we are going straight to 'Trevor Lordship.' Henry wished it, as there was a good deal to see to."

Miss Price nodded, and then she looked at the younger woman with shrewd, kindly eyes, noting the tired face, the steady, gentle expression. Certainly Eleanor did not look like a bride eagerly awaiting the arrival of a long-expected and desired bridegroom. Was everything indeed as it should be? she wondered. Then she laid her hand on hers, and said quietly: —

"Eleanor, why don't you put off your marriage? Are you quite sure you care for him?"

Eleanor started in surprise.

"Why, Miss Price," she said falteringly, "of course — you know we have cared — we have been engaged for fifteen years!"

Before her companion could reply, Mr. Russell stepped out of the garden door, calling for his daughter.

"Eleanor! Eleanor! Where are you?"

"I must go," she said hurriedly. "I will come back in a moment."

"No," said Miss Price, "I am going now. I shall

see you in church to-morrow. Good-bye, my dear. God bless you. Don't come with me; I'll open the gate."

Eleanor walked towards her father.

"Here I am," she said; "do you want anything?"

"It is most tiresome! These maids of yours are such fools. I bought a bottle of varnish, sent to London for it on purpose, and now they don't know where it is, and my boots won't be ready for to-morrow!"

"I can find it," she answered.

"But I tell you they must be varnished to-day, or they won't be dry, and I'm sure I don't know if Susan can do them properly, and in spite of all I said, that laundress will not glaze my collars."

"I am sorry about the collars," said Eleanor, smiling; "but do not worry about the boots. I will do them myself, and I assure you that they will be quite ready for to-morrow."

"What about that Niphetos rosebud? I hope it will not be too far out. I want it particularly for my buttonhole." Mr. Russell might have been the bridegroom by his concern respecting the details of his toilet! "I think I'll go and put a piece of paper round it to prevent it opening too wide."

Eleanor fetched his boots, and carried them to her storeroom where the precious bottle of varnish was waiting for them. The little house was beginning

to look strange, for she had packed away all her personal possessions, and the cases were standing in the corner of the hall. She knew very well that her father's one idea was to get out of the place as quickly as possible; the rest of the furniture was to be stored, and the house let.

"I must not forget to arrange for those cases going to 'Trevor Lordship,'" she thought. She looked round her little storeroom with regret. It had so many associations! For so many years it had been an intimate part of her daily life; the time spent in it represented the few quiet moments which she had been able to call her own. She knew every jar! — the place for everything! On one side the lavender and herbs, the dried rose leaves; and on the other, the household stores, jams and preserves. The shelves were nearly empty now; she had given everything away to a few friends and the villagers, and she felt as if a tie had snapped under her hand.

She felt a little nervous at the idea of the long journey the next day; her head was aching, and she was a very inexperienced traveller. She hoped Henry would not think her very dull and stupid; it was certainly unfortunate that he should be returning just when she was not quite her usual self.

She completed her task with the thoroughness habitual to her, neatly and expeditiously. One great

beauty about Eleanor was her hands; they were not small, but they were beautifully shaped, white and soft, and had in everything a touch firm and capable. The kind of hands that invest even the doing up of a parcel with a certain nobility.

Then she started upstairs to complete her packing, but heard her father calling "Eleanor! Eleanor!" in his usual testy tone.

"I am coming," she called back.

He always wanted something; if it was not boots or collars, it was something of similar importance. Just now it was a spot on his overcoat!

And so the day passed, as other days had passed before, alternately in running errands and doing little jobs for her father, and trying to finish the necessary arrangements before leaving her little home.

At about four o'clock that afternoon, the question of the rosebud became of importance again. There was no doubt it would be full blown on the morrow. What was to be done?

"Let us go and find another," suggested Eleanor. "I think we can find one just as good in the kitchen garden."

"It must be white," persisted Mr. Russell. "I am going to wear a white tie."

They were deciding the knotty point, when the maid arrived, and said that Sir Henry Trevor was in the drawing-room.

Mr. Russell became at once greatly excited.

"Come at once, Eleanor," he said. "We must on no account keep him waiting," and he bustled into the house.

"Ah! my dear Henry," he said blandly, "welcome back to the old country, after your long exile. We are very pleased to see you."

Trevor shook hands with him, then turned to Eleanor, who held out her hand.

There was an almost imperceptible pause, then he stooped, and raised it to his lips with an old-fashioned courtesy. Anything more sentimental was impossible in the presence of Mr. Russell, who stood like a benign master of the ceremonies, in a sort of "Bless you, my children" attitude, which was as obvious as it was irritating.

"Do sit down," he said, when this little ceremony was over; and somewhat constrainedly the two sat down, at either end of the big Chesterfield sofa.

"I trust you will be pleased with the arrangements I have made," he continued pompously. "You will of course understand that, owing to our recent bereavement," — he glanced downwards with an air of stage affliction as he spoke, — "the wedding will be very quiet and simple. It will take place at twelve o'clock. That will allow time for a little light luncheon here before you catch the two o'clock express."

While her father continued these details, which he

felt displayed his organizing genius, Eleanor looked at the man who had thus come into her life again.

Henry Trevor was at this time forty, but he looked at least ten years older. He was very tall, thin almost to emaciation, and stooped very much. Eleanor had known that he had had some trouble with his eyes a year or two before, but she had not been prepared to see him wearing smoked spectacles. It disconcerted her, for it effectually disguised any trace that might have remained, in this middle-aged man, of the lover of long ago.

He wore a heavy moustache, which, like his hair, was turning a little grey. What with his moustache hiding his mouth, and his spectacles hiding his eyes, there seemed nothing left of him to recognize, except his voice, which was quiet, and very pleasant, and sounded a note of memory.

She felt vaguely glad he did not look younger; she was conscious of feeling old herself, and had feared the age might be all on her side.

"I am sorry to say that my mother will not be well enough to come to-morrow," he was saying. "It was her intention to have been present, and my sister also, but she is unequal to any exertion in this heat, and hopes you will pardon her. My sister is only staying with her for a time, while her husband is abroad, and hardly likes to leave her."

Eleanor made some polite reply. She had never

for one moment imagined that Mrs. Trevor would come. She had persistently ignored the engagement for fifteen years, and Eleanor had never seen her. Henry Trevor did not think it necessary to say that there had been a discussion between them that morning, a little heated on his mother's side, in which she had bitterly upbraided him for his folly in marrying a person without any money, and whom nobody knew. He had been somewhat annoyed at his future wife being termed "a person." He felt it was hardly suitable, but he particularly disliked a scene of any kind, so he had merely remarked calmly that it was his intention to be married to Miss Russell on the following day, and that he should take his wife straight to 'Trevor Lordship' after the wedding.

CHAPTER III

A TURN IN THE ROAD

"... no time, however distant, but what you may reach and pass it,
... no road, but it stretches and waits for you,
However long but it stretches and waits for you."

—WALT WHITMAN.

MR. RUSSELL was, it would appear, the person to be considered above all others, the next morning. His boots were spotlessly shiny, which was a great consolation to him, and the white rosebud which adorned his buttonhole was, in every respect, entirely satisfactory.

He surveyed himself in the glass with some pride when his toilet was completed, and with great regret reflected that there would be no one worth mentioning to see the gorgeous effect of his *tout ensemble*. However, it would not be many days before he found himself in a more congenial neighbourhood, where admiring eyes would surely linger on his dashing appearance. He purposed what he called "a little run upon the Continent," Dieppe to start with, and later, perhaps, Homburg. In these places he had no doubt he would be appreciated at his proper value.

Meanwhile, Eleanor and the two maids had been

running here and there from an early hour, assisting to achieve the splendid result.

"Lor!" said Susan confidentially to Jane, "the master he do look a dog!"

To which Jane, who was elderly, and a trifle sour, replied: —

"Well, if he looks a dog, it's Miss Eleanor who's been a-workin' like one!" Which comment summed up the truth admirably.

Eleanor had gone late to bed the night before, and had risen early; she had run hither and thither in response to his repeated demands, until at eleven o'clock he sent her upstairs, with strict injunctions not to keep him waiting. They would leave the house at five minutes before twelve, and walk to the church.

In the welcome solitude of her own room, she sat down for a while to rest. She had been much struck on the previous afternoon with the quietness of Henry Trevor's demeanour, and it had pleased her. There would, undoubtedly, be peace in their life, and this was the one thing she really desired. After to-day, when that long journey was over, a period of quiet would begin.

He had spoken very kindly of their future life together, had trusted that she would be happy; and she had replied that she hoped he would be the same, all in a natural, quiet way which comforted her a

good deal. She hardly knew what she would have done, had Henry been bustling like her father.

Presently she rose and began to dress. She put on her wedding gown, and a large hat with white plumes, which became her exceedingly well. She tidied her room, and closed her last trunk; then, finding she had a few minutes to spare, stood before the dressing-table, drawing on her gloves. As she did so, she noticed her engagement ring. It was a thick band of gold with one sapphire in it, and it had never been off her finger since Henry Trevor had put it there years before. She realized that it would be replaced by another in a few moments, and with a little blush she took it off and put it on her right hand. Then some of her conversation with Miss Price returned to her mind, and she looked at herself in the glass with careful scrutiny. She certainly looked old and tired, and her hair was drawn back too tightly. She tried to better it, feeling rather ashamed of herself, it was so long since she had considered her looks, but she was disturbed by her father's voice, in the well-known cry, "Eleanor! Eleanor!" and, hastily buttoning her glove, she went downstairs.

In the hall Susan and Jane were waiting, and, with many giggles on the part of the former, they presented her with a bunch of white flowers. It was rather stiff, and the paper frill round it was suggestive of a ham, but Eleanor was touched by the

little attention, and assured them she would carry it to church.

After repeated instructions from Mr. Russell to the servants that lunch was to be punctually at half-past twelve, and that the champagne was on no account to be opened before they came back, father and daughter walked down the little garden path, across to the quiet church.

A few villagers were waiting, and one or two old friends, including Miss Price, were seated in the pews. The hour of the ceremony had become known, in spite of Mr. Russell's endeavours to the contrary, and they were come to see her married, for she was a great favourite with all.

Henry Trevor was standing waiting on the chancel step. In the subdued light, he looked younger than on the previous day. He was perfectly calm, and in his blue serge suit, with a grey tie, and not even a flower in his buttonhole, did not appear in the least like a bridegroom. He was congratulating himself on the general absence of bustle: the calm demeanour of Eleanor, the quiet arrangements, and the simple service in the little country church, were entirely to his mind. Accustomed to solitude as he had been for so many years, he had dreaded to find himself the centre of a gaping crowd of guests, which he would have detested cordially.

But though Eleanor was outwardly calm, her looks

belied her, for she went through the service with a feeling of unreality which disturbed her. It seemed incredible that the long expected was really an accomplished fact. That she should one day marry Henry Trevor she had long known, but that the moment had actually arrived seemed impossible. It was almost as if this was the climax to the love story of that girl of the long ago, the "Sweet Nell" of the first letter. It was so difficult to believe that the Eleanor Russell of the last years was the same woman. It was almost as if she were possessed of a dual personality, as if presently "Sweet Nell" would go away with her bridegroom, and Eleanor Russell would return to the little house across the road. As Henry Trevor placed the ring upon her finger, the whole scene seemed to swim in a mist before her eyes, and she heard a voice she did not recognize as her own saying the responses. She thought vaguely that it must be "Sweet Nell" speaking. She took her husband's arm mechanically when he offered it, and the little party moved into the vestry.

Mr. Russell now seemed to think that he had remained in the background quite long enough, for he came forward quickly, and, embracing his daughter in his best "heavy father" manner, pompously congratulated them both.

Miss Price shook hands with Sir Henry, and gave her good wishes heartily.

"But you have taken the joy out of my life, and into your own," she said, in her quick, decided way.

Sir Henry bowed; his tongue was out of practice for repartee, it would seem, for he made no other reply.

During the short walk to the house, and the luncheon which followed, Eleanor was still conscious of the unreality of the part she was playing, but she was grateful to Sir Henry for engaging her father in conversation, and for the matter of fact way in which he cut Mr. Russell short in his verbose farewells, and led her to the carriage. She waved a good-bye to the maids, and a few people who lingered at the gate, and, side by side with the man who was her husband, started on the journey they were to take together.

"I fear you are very tired," Sir Henry said. "It is very hot to-day."

"Yes," she replied; "but the air is delicious driving, and very refreshing."

"It is a long journey," he continued; "we shall not arrive until about nine o'clock; but I understand we can dine in the train."

"Can you remember 'Trevor Lordship'?" she asked. "What is the house like?"

"As far as I can recall it, it is an old Elizabethan house, approached by an avenue of lime-trees. I understand it contains some fine old furniture and china, and, what interests me more, a very good library. The

lawyers gave me the catalogue yesterday as I passed through London, and there are apparently many books which I have longed all my life to possess."

"You have not been able to obtain many of late years?" Eleanor enquired.

"More than you would think," Sir Henry replied quickly. "My nearest neighbour was an old German savant, who was ending his days in his daughter's home. Her husband was farming, like the rest of us. Professor Kohler his name was, and he had very constant consignments of the newest books out from Europe, and I had the run of them. I was referring more to older books, and older editions, which I have always wished to see. You are fond of books?" he added questioningly.

"Very," she answered; "but I have had very little time for reading in the past. I have always been rather busy."

"Ah!" he said, "that has been the same in my case, but I hope that in the future we shall be able to make up for the past."

On arrival at the station, he asked her what papers she would like for the journey, and she mentioned one, more from a dislike to refusing than from any desire to read. He provided himself with a pile of literature, and helped her into the train, solicitous of her comfort in a way to which she was quite unaccustomed, and found very pleasant. Having

ascertained that she wanted nothing more, he established himself in the corner opposite her.

"Will you excuse my reading?" he asked, with a smile. "Talking in the train is not very pleasant, is it? And it is so very delightful to me to read the news of the day before it is two months old."

"I would much rather not talk," she said; "and it is very nice to do nothing."

She leaned back in her corner, and closed her eyes; the rest was very grateful. Certainly if life with Henry was going to continue on these lines, she might hope for the peace for which she had longed, and meanwhile, to do nothing was most enjoyable.

When dinner time came they moved into the restaurant car, and during the meal Sir Henry chatted easily.

"There are one or two matters I should like to talk over with you. I have no experience in the management of a house, and I told the lawyers to ask my uncle's servants to stay on until something was definitely arranged. In this regard, however, I am quite at sea, and I fear I must ask you to undertake it, if you will."

"Certainly," Eleanor said at once. "I have been used to running a house, and can manage all that perfectly, if you will tell me just what you like done."

Her husband was obviously relieved.

"I am very grateful," he said. "That will be excellent. You must make what arrangements you like; I will leave everything in your hands. In the farm, of course, I am more or less at home, but the garden will be a strange country to me."

"I have always loved my garden," Eleanor said, smiling. "Would you like me to manage that too?"

"Indeed I should," he answered promptly. "If it will not be troubling you too much."

"Not in the least; I shall thoroughly enjoy it."

"There is another point," Sir Henry said, rather hesitatingly. "I dislike mentioning it, but it is a necessity. With regard to the disagreeable subject of money, I have arranged for you to have a signature on my banking account, and I beg you will draw exactly what you require. It will not be necessary for you to stint yourself in any way. My income will be a very comfortable one, and I am sure you will be quite wise, and that I can safely leave this matter in your hands. I will, if you wish it, go more particularly into figures, later on."

"I think that would be a good thing," she said. "I might spend too much. But I am anxious to save you trouble," she added, "and I am quite accustomed to managing."

"Ah!" he answered, "I fear you will find that I much appreciate being saved trouble! I trust you will not hesitate to let me know at once, though, if

there is any arrangement you dislike, or which you would prefer altered."

Eleanor smiled.

"I am very easily satisfied," she said.

Her spirits were rising. If she had not felt so tired, she would have quite enjoyed the journey. Henry certainly was delightfully easy to get on with, and again she hoped she might be able to make him happy—this time with more assurance.

On arriving at the nearest station to 'Trevor Lordship,' they found a carriage waiting for them. It was quite dark, and they could see nothing of the country through which they drove, but after about half an hour they reached the house. An elderly butler met them, and showed them into a large room surrounded with book-cases.

"This is the library, Sir Henry. Will her ladyship take a little soup or wine? Or would she wish Mrs. Johns to show her upstairs?"

Eleanor had not in the least realized her new title, and started a little as the man spoke. Then she answered. No, she required nothing. They had dined in the train. She would like to sit still for a few minutes, and then she would ring for the housekeeper to take her upstairs.

She sat down in a low, old-fashioned armchair, glad to be free from the shaking of the train and carriage. Her husband was walking round looking

at the books, uttering every now and then a comment or an exclamation. He was evidently deeply interested. Presently she rose, and he walked back to where she was standing. Then he said slowly and rather shyly, —

"I hope — that you will be very happy here — I should like to welcome you — Eleanor — "

He stooped in the act to kiss her, but to his astonishment she swayed for a moment, and then fell back into the chair she had just quitted, and he saw to his consternation that she had fainted.

When Eleanor came to her senses, she found an elderly woman, presumably Mrs. Johns, bending over her, and Sir Henry standing by, looking very much concerned. She pulled herself together, and struggled to her feet.

"I am so very sorry," she said. "I cannot think why I did it. I have never fainted in my life before. I suppose I am over-tired. I am so ashamed of giving so much trouble."

"Come upstairs with me, my lady," said the housekeeper. "You'd best get to bed."

Eleanor felt rather dazed; she held out her hand to her husband.

"Good-night," she said.

There was a moment's pause. Sir Henry seemed a little surprised.

"Good-night," he said. "I hope you will be much

better in the morning. I have no doubt you require a good rest."

"Please do not think any more about me," she answered. "I shall be quite well to-morrow."

Sir Henry closed the door after her. "I do trust she is not delicate," he thought to himself, and with that he returned to the engrossing survey of his new library.

CHAPTER IV

'TREVOR LORDSHIP'

"To deny that man is, in a sense, the creature of circumstances, is equal to the denial that two and two make four; and to deny that man cannot make circumstances, is equal to affirming that two and two make five." — J. Johnson.

It would have been almost impossible to have found a man less suited to the life of the backwoods than Henry Trevor, and this fact must be borne in mind by any who may wonder at the effect which fifteen years of comparative solitude had had upon his character and mind.

He had been a youth of barely twenty-five when his father died, and the thread of his life, which had hitherto run smoothly, took a sudden twist. They had been devoted friends, and as long as Mr. Trevor lived, Henry had never lacked any sympathy or interest in his pursuits or occupations. He had done extremely well at Cambridge, and had a great ambition to take to journalism and literature as a profession, to which he had without difficulty obtained his father's consent.

It was at this time that he first met Eleanor Russell. He was staying with friends in the village where she lived, and their acquaintance soon ripened

into that dangerous, but almost inevitable disease, first love.

It must be admitted that the news of their engagement was badly received by the relatives on both sides, but finally Mr. Trevor sanctioned it. He was perhaps the person who understood his son's temperament best of all, and he realized that he was just at an age where such a tie might be a stimulus to work, and a weight to balance his somewhat high-flown opinions and impulsive actions.

Henry was ardent and hopeful. So soon as his position on the staff of a young and, it must be confessed, very Radical paper, was more assured, they were to be married, and for a short time all seemed *couleur de rose*. Then Mr. Trevor died quite suddenly, leaving only an old will made many years before, in which he bequeathed everything he possessed to his wife.

Mrs. Trevor was a woman of very decided opinions, and did not in the least sympathize with her son in his ambition for literary glory. She considered it rubbish, and waste of time. She was also quite certain that the income she received after her husband's death was only sufficient to support herself and a daughter, then nearly seventeen years old, in a suitable manner. Therefore the only thing was for Henry to get to work as quickly as possible; this scribbling, and philandering with a penniless

miss, must cease; and being, as we have said, a woman of strong character, and being, moreover, in a position to command, as she held the purse-strings, she packed him off to Australia before his father had lain in his grave three months.

Being genuinely in love, and having a good measure of self-confidence, Henry Trevor started, perfectly satisfied that his exile would only be of short duration. That this idea was erroneous we are already aware.

There was no question that he worked hard, and did his very best with brain and hands, but a race-horse harnessed to a Pantechnicon van would be about as much in its proper place as was Henry Trevor. It is conceivable that the van might move, but that its advance would either be certain or rapid is unlikely.

To begin with, the life in some ways called out the best of one side of his character, and with a determination not to be beaten, he set about his work with a dogged obstinacy which would have done him no harm had the experience been only temporary. But as year succeeded year, and found him no nearer to the goal of his hopes, his heart ceased to be in his work at all. His highly strung and sensitive nature became dull and warped, and it may be counted as something to his credit that he did not follow in the steps of many round him, and drift rapidly to the dogs.

From this he was saved by succeeding influences. First, the memory of Eleanor prevented him joining in the doubtful forms of pleasure which were practically the only amusements to be had, and secondly, when the strength of that memory was perhaps weakened a little, he chanced to meet the man he had mentioned in his conversation with Eleanor, already recorded.

Johann Kohler was a man such as is not infrequently met with in the Colonies. For some reason, probably not in any way connected with his own wishes, he was obliged to put the seas between himself and his Fatherland. Henry always surmised that it was something in the nature of a political offence, although he had no grounds for his belief, beyond his knowledge of the man's character.

Kohler was reticent as to his past or present circumstances, but he appeared to be possessed of an assured income, as the fluctuations of the barometer, that never-ending anxiety to the Australian squatter, concerned him apparently not at all. In the price of wool he was openly uninterested, but the arrival of his quarterly case of books from Berlin excited him almost into a fever. He was a good linguist, and the contents of the box were representative publications of the literature of England and France, as well as Germany, and covered a very wide range of subjects.

He became sincerely attached to Henry Trevor,

and, shrewdly diagnosing his condition to be one of positive mental starvation, did his best to counteract it.

This, then, was the man who, for nearly ten years, was the only congenial companion Trevor had known. It can hardly be wondered at, then, if his horizon became also bounded by the case from Berlin, and that every spare moment of the day or night was spent at Kohler's house. When we consider for one moment the fact that many of us who live in country villages, and even towns, have been accused of being "groovy," in spite of our being at all events able to interchange ideas and opinions with at least a few dozens of human beings, and then consider whether it was unnatural that this young man, enduring what was practically solitary confinement through the best years of his life, with one old German bookworm and a feast of books, and starting, mark you! with a strong bent in the same direction, should become oblivious of the fact that the world had any other diet to offer.

When the news of his inheritance reached him he realized that his exile was over, and that he was free at last; but it was not with unmixed joy that he looked forward to entering the whirlpool of life again. He had lived too long in a backwater to feel prepared to swim in full stream.

He thought of Eleanor with some apprehension, but

at the same time the idea of not marrying her never crossed his mind. That was an unalterable arrangement, as much part of him as his eyes, or his right hand, but he only hoped that she would not make demands upon his time. He had existed, rather more dead than alive, mentally, he considered, for what seemed to him to be a century, and now, come what might, he had every intention of arranging his own life, and enjoying himself in his own way.

But very soon after he and his wife came to 'Trevor Lordship,' this apprehension vanished, and he was more content than he had ever been before.

The library, which was a noted one, had fallen into the hands of some one who really knew how to appreciate it, and sometimes, as he sat in the evening with his chair drawn up to the uncurtained window, the lamp just where the light fell right, and turning over the pages of some long-desired treasure with reverent fingers, he felt that he had no wish ungratified. He was very much in the position of the drunkard who, after having been for years limited to just sufficient liquor to whet his appetite, suddenly finds himself with an unlimited quantity ready to his hand, only waiting for him to help himself.

He had very quickly regulated the hours of the household to suit his own convenience. Early rising had become a habit, and he rose at five o'clock every morning, and, after an early cup of coffee, rode on

horseback for two or three hours. This daily proceeding had very nearly caused a rebellion among the respectable servants, to whom the appearance of the master of the house before eight-thirty, at earliest, was an indecent thing; but of this he was quite unconscious. Returning about eight o'clock, he went into the library, where he remained until the gong sounded for luncheon. After luncheon he generally walked round the small farm attached to the gardens, and then he was not visible again until dinner time. It cannot be said that when this time-table was followed he was overburdened with the society of his wife. But be this as it may, he was supremely contented.

Eleanor too had found the peace for which she had longed. When once the rest and quiet had restored to her her usual strength of mind and body, she had taken up such occupations as lay to her hand with keen enjoyment. The servants, a little inclined at first to resent the authority of a new mistress, soon found that she was not to be imposed upon, and, in a short time, learnt to respect her wishes. There is, after all, nothing which leads to this happy result more rapidly than the quickly realized fact that the mistress knows what she is talking about, and this Eleanor certainly did. She was a born *femme de menage*, and so this part of her duties took up very little time.

The house itself was a great delight to her. Eliza-

bethan in character, what restorations had from time to time been necessary had been done with taste and judgment, for the result was not apparent. The staircase, hall, and dining-room were panelled in old oak, hung with a few good portraits. On one side of the large hall was the dining-room, and on the other the library, while behind the latter lay a pretty morning room, with a door and a few stone steps leading into the garden.

The drawing room was upstairs, as is frequently the case in houses of this date, a long, low room panelled with silk of a delicate faded blue. Over the fireplace, a "Claude" painting was framed into the white over-mantel. The furniture was chiefly French, with a few good examples of Sheraton and Hepplewhite, and there were several recesses in the walls with shelves loaded with china.

Miss Price had been a collector and connoisseur of porcelain, and Eleanor had learnt enough about it from her to highly appreciate her new possessions. The most severe critic would have found very little to cavil at in the old house at 'Trevor Lordship,' and Eleanor was certainly not critical. Each succeeding day she felt her love for the place growing stronger.

The garden was also a never-ending joy. All the late summer flowers had been in their beauty when she first saw it, and now each day was clothing the surrounding landscape in more beautiful tints of

crimson and gold. The old gardener, delighted with her appreciation of the scene of his lifelong labours, was ready to do anything in the world to please her, even to cutting his most cherished blooms.

Eleanor had, within the first few weeks of her married life, asked her husband more than once if she were not usurping authority in matters which he would prefer to keep under his own control, but she soon discovered the truth, namely, that, so long as he was not disturbed, she might do exactly as she liked.

She did not forget her old friend in the midst of her new content, and every week she wrote a long letter to Miss Price. Letters which the old lady read carefully, answered fondly, and then laid away with a sigh. A sigh not so much for the present, as for the future of the younger woman whom she so dearly loved.

It is a pity that the phrase, "a woman with a past," has come to be used only in an unpleasant sense. If we divest our minds of this modern application of the words, and use them in the simple and not the double sense, we see that it is only when a woman has a past, when she has lived through the fires that purify while they burn, that she is really able to bring the deepest sympathy, and the fullest understanding, to bear upon the lives of those around her.

Miss Price had not spent all her life in a quiet

country village that was merely the haven of her later years; and the lives of those she had known, the romance, the tragedy, the splendour, and the squalor which exist under the cloak in which it is the merciful custom for us to hide our inner selves from strangers, were no secret to her. She had a particularly strong faculty for understanding the minds of others, when, as she put it, they were worth understanding. So she sighed as she laid Eleanor's weekly letters together, wondering how long it would be before the wife realized that conjugal affection, even when calm, did not mean merely acting as housekeeper and head gardener; and when that day came, what would be the result?

It is an axiom that men are creatures of habit. By men, presumably, is meant the human race, as it is a feminine as well as a masculine characteristic. But how few of us really understand how large a part habit, or the doing the thing expected of us, plays in our everyday actions!

Both Eleanor and Henry Trevor, but particularly the former, would have been profoundly astonished if any one had suggested to them that they had married because it was the thing expected of them, the thing that they had expected of themselves, and not from that strong desire and yearning for each other, which, after all, constitutes the greatest, if not the only, chance of making a success of the undertaking.

They had allowed themselves to drift blindly on the stream of circumstances. But in her deep affection for Eleanor Trevor, Miss Price was able to make a shrewd guess at the truth, and she knew well that her mind was too strong for this state of things to continue indefinitely. It had been, as it were, stupefied by the stagnant surroundings in which her life had for years been passed, but that was altered now, and when its natural power reasserted itself, what would happen? Would the awakening, when it came, be for weal or woe?

CHAPTER V

LAVENDER

"For on our daily road, all travellers are brothers!
We learn from all, and teach something, perchance, to others.
Be the way long or short, in sun or rainy weather,
We're richer, all, I know, for journeying together."

HAD any stranger desired information regarding the inhabitants of the village of 'Trevor Lordship,' he would, had he been wise in his generation, have gone to the sexton for it. The connection between providing seemly resting-places for the departed, and having an intimate knowledge of every detail of the lives of the living is not apparent, but the two frequently go together.

This worthy would, in all probability, have led the enquirer as far as the lych-gate, for this point of vantage afforded a *coup d'œil* of the main street of the village, which was, in point of fact, the only street it boasted.

On either side of the wide thoroughfare were only two houses worthy of note. On the right-hand side lived Dr. Walker and Mr. Stephens the solicitor, and on the left hand Captain Maitland and Lavender Hagger. It would have been obvious from the sexton's tone that the first two people were of no particular

interest, but that the last two named were of the highest importance to the community.

This was the case, although their stations in life were very different, one being Captain Maitland, R.N. (retired), and the other being Mrs. Lavender Hagger, of the village shop.

In the opinion of Mrs. Stephens, the solicitor's wife, this was a ridiculous state of things, and quite undeserved. It rankled in the good lady's mind that, in spite of her long residence in the village, she had never been able to attain to the pinnacle of fame attained by Lavender Hagger, Grocer.

Why did every one go to the little shop with their troubles and worries, and, still harder to bear, with their gossip? To be first with any piece of news was the joy of her life, and there was very little of that commodity in 'Trevor Lordship.' Also, why quiet old Captain Maitland, who saw few friends of his own standing, and never even gave a dinner party! should be so popular, she was at a loss to understand. But then, it must be granted, she was not a lady of discernment.

The Captain had lived in the house next to the quaint little shop for over twenty years. *Vide* the sexton, he had been to the North Pole, and nearly died there. He had been an intimate friend of the late Sir Henry Trevor, and Eleanor had not been many weeks in her new home before a warm friend-

ship grew up between her and the old man. At first sight he was not a striking figure, short and spare, with a quiet, rather grave manner, and faded blue eyes with a sad expression in them when he was silent. When he spoke, however, the sadness vanished, and such a change came over his face that the first time Eleanor saw it she felt that she must have been mistaken, and that it was not sad at all. Such a sympathy and lovingkindness seemed to radiate from him, and there at once was the reason why every one loved him, and why he never walked through the village without a trail of little attendants who hung upon his every word and look. He certainly was one of the most delightful people Eleanor had ever met.

One afternoon, late in October, she paid him a visit, in order to choose for herself some plants of a particular Michaelmas daisy which she wished to possess for her herbaceous border, and having decided this point to her satisfaction, Captain Maitland volunteered to accompany her as far as the lodge, and they passed down the street together.

"Have you made the acquaintance of Lavender yet?" asked the Captain.

"Oh, yes," said Eleanor, smiling; "isn't she a wonderful woman? That type of real old-fashioned country woman did not exist in the village where I used to live. Do tell me something about her life."

"She has had rather a struggle," was the answer. "Her husband was an honest, stupid, thoroughly well-intentioned man, who never made any money in his life. He died about ten years ago. She has had many children, but all died young, with the exception of one, a daughter, who married six or seven years back. She was the child of Lavender's old age, and her mother adored her, and, in consequence, I fear, spoilt her a little. When she was about twenty, she ran away from home, and married a man of rather bad character, half a gipsy, and wholly a ne'er-do-well, much to her mother's grief. She had done all she could for several years to stop the affair, and afterwards could only be thankful they were married."

"Does she live here too?" asked Eleanor.

"They live in a caravan, and move about from place to place, which the old woman feels is a dreadful come down, but she never says much about it. And certainly the few times I have seen the girl, she looks beamingly happy. She brought her baby to see me last year, and both she and the child looked pictures of health. I do not think the shop is a very lucrative business now. The stores at Larnham, only five miles off, have cut into the old trade very much, I fancy."

"We must give her some orders," said Eleanor; "which reminds me that I had forgotten to buy the

ball of string I wanted. Do you mind very much if we go back? It isn't very far. I wonder why string has such a peculiar faculty for disappearing, — and pens too," she added, smiling.

"I have sometimes thought," responded her companion, as they retraced their steps, "that there is a tribe of invisible domestic demons who run off with the very thing you are looking for, and then, when you have, in despair, given up looking for it, Hey, presto! it is lying in front of your nose, generally in its proper place. Have you never noticed it with letters? If I want to answer a letter, which I am thankful to say is not often, I lay it down on my table, and the next moment it has vanished into thin air. After a frenzied search among my papers, I give it up, and lo and behold! there it is again."

"I don't think I have noticed it with letters," she replied. "But it certainly is the case with string!"

The Captain put his hand into his pocket, and gravely produced two pieces of string, one thick, and one thin, done up sailor fashion into little hanks.

"My life depended once on a piece of string no thicker than that. Try my plan, and always carry some."

"Ah!" laughed Eleanor, "men have the advantage of us in the matter of pockets."

It was Saturday afternoon, and the little shop was crowded when they entered. It did not take many people to crowd it. Behind the counter old Lavender

was busy serving her customers, and dispensing goods and advice at the same time.

"Ah! Mrs. May," she was saying, as Eleanor came in, "try camomile flowers; there's nothing like them, you may be sure."

"Nought seems to touch it, not a bit," was the reply, given in lugubrious tones. "Some one told me to try alum, said that was what the doctors used, but it warn't no manner of use."

"You can't expect to cure a thing at once," replied Lavender, briskly. "Try camomile flowers, and hope. Good-evening, m' lady, what may I do for you?"

Eleanor stated her requirements, but added that she could wait a moment.

"You must not keep your customers waiting for me. Good-evening, Mrs. May," she went on, turning to the woman who had just spoken. "I hope your husband is better?"

"No, m' lady, he isn't, not a bit. He's just a slipping off. He says to me this day, says he, 'My dear, don't you worry to walk to t' shop, for I'll be gone before you come back.' That was the very words he said, and I never was one as held with trying to keep them back what wished to go. But I came down to get a few things for him," she added, with unconscious inconsistency.

"Now, Mrs. May," said Lavender, "don't go talk-

ing like that. If that's the sort of talk you give to William, there's no wonder he's bad. Give him a turn of cheerfulness."

"'Tain't every one 'as got cheerfulness to give," put in another woman.

"Well," Lavender replied, "my brother, as used to be coachman up at yours, m' lady," she nodded at Eleanor, "many years ago used to say 'twas a matter of a sluggish liver. Many and many's the time I've heard him say, 'When you feels like that, put your trust in God, and take a bite off a horse-ball!'"

Eleanor laughed heartily, there was something irresistibly funny in the old lady's manner. As she spoke, she nodded her head repeatedly all the time. The light of a lamp which hung from the ceiling shone on the small, tight knob into which her white hair was drawn, giving her the appearance of a nodding little Chinese god, and her brown hands were moving quickly this way and that, weighing, folding, tying, with the dexterity born of long practice.

"That's a long way to go home, that it is, when you've shoppin's to carry," resumed Mrs. May, plaintively; "and that path through the mill field, that is rough!"

"Ay, that it is," chipped in one or two voices.

"I spoke to Mr. Brown about it a week or two back, I did. I said 'twere a wonder as my legs weren't broke. And what do you think he said?"

There was a moment's breathless silence among the audience, as she waited to emphasize the effect of her words.

"He said," she announced dramatically, "that 'some of us needed a rough path'! That's what he said. There! What d'ye think of that?"

"It wasn't quite kind," Eleanor replied.

"No, m' lady, that it weren't, not quite kind, but"—and her voice dropped back into its former lugubrious tone, as she picked up her basket and prepared to go—"it's got to be trod, and I'm main sure he'll not be there when I get back."

"Come, come!" put in Lavender, decidedly, as she took down the string for Eleanor. "Just you go home and try camomile flowers, and hope. Good-night. Good-night."

A few moments later, Eleanor and Captain Maitland resumed their walk. It was dusk, and the air was full of coming frost. That first frost of autumn which seems to brace us, body and soul, after the relaxation of summer's heat.

"I hope I did not keep you too long, but really it was so interesting."

"Not a bit," he answered heartily. "I often go into the shop on a Saturday night, just to stand and watch. It is better than a theatre to me, because even if they do act a little, like Mrs. May, it is quite unconsciously. What a picture it made, didn't it?

The group of tired, toil-worn faces in half shadow, and the light shining full on old Lavender. Do you know, Lady Trevor, that she is one of those people for whom time stands still, I think. She hasn't altered a scrap since I first knew her, twenty years ago. The first time I saw her she was standing, just as she was to-night, full of cheerfulness, sympathy, and good sense, and oh dear! how funny she is sometimes, without in the least meaning it. Now which was the cure for depression really? The horse-ball, or the trust in God?"

"Oh, undoubtedly the two together," returned Eleanor, laughing. "That was the whole point, like the camomile flowers and hope. I do not know who lives here," she added, as they passed a gateway, leading into what, in the fading light, appeared to be a shrubbery.

"That," said the Captain, "is a house of mystery. Not really, you know, but if the gossips in a little village are not able to find out everything, they immediately hint at a secret. It belongs to the Mr. Brown who owns the famous path, a butcher in Larnham. A cousin of your husband's lived in it for some time, and there used to be a gate leading from the garden into your park, but I suppose it is closed now. A Scotchman and his wife live there now, Mollison by name. Very quiet, respectable people of the farmer class, but as he does no work beyond looking after

the garden, the villagers ask, 'Where does he get his money from?'"

"Is that all the mystery?"

"Well, there is a rumour that there is a mysterious lady living there, who is his employer, but how true that is, I don't know. The little place is quite secluded, and no one ever sees any one except the man, and very occasionally the wife. Mrs. Stephens is getting quite thin in her unsuccessful efforts to find out the truth. She ventured to the house once, I believe, but was routed by Mrs. Mollison."

"If there is any one living there, there seems to be no reason why they should not be left alone, if they do not desire company."

"In the eyes of Mrs. Stephens," continued Captain Maitland, with a smile, "there is a crime in seclusion. Poor woman! she has her points, but she is a square peg in a round hole. She ought to live in a suburb of London, where tea fights and muffin worries abound, and every one lives on their neighbour's doormat, and all the domestic details are hung out on a line, like the family washing."

"With a label displayed in the area, 'No privacy permitted,' like 'No bottles,'" laughed Eleanor. "It is lucky we don't all think alike!"

"Fortunately we don't all consider a person of reserve to be a shade worse than a burglar!" the Captain continued. "Personally, my fellow-creatures

interest me enormously, but I shouldn't like to pry into their private affairs, any more than I should like them to pry into mine. After all, we are all steering the same course, and when I see a ship, I like to speak it, to pass the time of day, and hear if all's well with them, but I shouldn't think of boarding them, and insisting upon reading their log, unless I was especially invited to do so. Every one has entries intended only for the eye of the Superior Officer. Haven't you found that?"

There was a moment's pause, and then Eleanor said slowly: —

"I think there are entries which we sometimes do not quite understand ourselves."

"They will be made clear when the accounts are squared, and we are paid off," he said simply. "But here we are at your door, Lady Trevor. I have come further than I intended."

"Won't you come in for a little?"

"No, thank you," was the reply. "It is getting chilly; I will be getting home now. Good-night," as they shook hands, "and thank you for a pleasant walk."

As Eleanor crossed the hall, the butler came forward.

"If you please, my lady," he said, "Sir Henry has been asking for you. A gentleman of the name of Locke is with him, came about two hours ago. A lawyer, I think, my lady."

He was evidently interested in the visitor, as is the way of an old servant.

"Tell Sir Henry I will be with him in five minutes, Turner," she replied, as she hurried upstairs to remove her coat and hat. "How unfortunate," she thought to herself, "that I should happen to be out the very first time he sends for me."

CHAPTER VI

AN INTERVIEW

"For nothing on earth is sadder
Than the dream that cheated the grasp."
—A. L. Gordon.

"Mr. Locke has brought me an unexpected piece of information, Eleanor," said Sir Henry, when, a few minutes later, she entered the library. He seemed a little perturbed, she thought, as he stood with his back to the fire, repeatedly passing his hand over his hair. She had learnt that this little trick showed itself when anything occurred to disturb the even tenor of his thoughts.

"Yes," replied the lawyer; "I am afraid it was quite unexpected."

"I think the best plan will be for you to give Lady Trevor the facts as you have given them to me, Mr. Locke."

Eleanor sat down in the chair her husband placed for her, wondering what in the world she was going to hear. Her thoughts flew round in different directions, but she could think of nothing likely to have necessitated her presence. Then Mr. Locke began.

"You may perhaps know, Lady Trevor, that your husband had a relation, a second cousin, one Robert

Trevor; a widower, who has been living at Wimbledon with his two daughters. He died recently, and in his will, of which I am an executor, he leaves the guardianship of his two daughters in the hands of two people, Sir Henry Trevor, of 'Trevor Lordship,' and a certain Lady Vernon who lives in London. Sir Henry has just been explaining to me that he was never acquainted with his kinsman, and is, in consequence, much surprised at being appointed guardian. The will is dated some seven years ago, and I think it is evident that the Sir Henry Trevor mentioned is not your husband, but his predecessor and uncle, who died, I understand, some months ago.

"Robert Trevor left very little money. The young ladies will have a joint income of only about £200 a year. I have seen a good deal of them in the last few weeks, and they appear to have no near relations to turn to in their trouble."

"Who is Lady Vernon, the other guardian?" asked Eleanor, as the lawyer paused.

"She is the widow of a city knight, a Sir William Vernon, who was, I think, connected with the big soap firm of that name. She is very rich, I believe, but, on the only occasion upon which I met her, seemed to me to be a most overpowering lady, with very decided opinions. The Miss Trevors do not know her well, and I cannot understand what prompted their father to appoint her one of their

guardians. I think I may say," added Mr. Locke, with a slight smile, "that they are not attracted to her."

"Has she offered to give them a home?" enquired Eleanor.

"No, the only offer she has made up to the present was to find a post for Miss Mildred as governess. It was her opinion that if this were done, the money could then be devoted to completing Miss Joan's education, an offer which I need not tell you the young ladies have resented. They are greatly averse to the idea of being parted."

"That is quite natural," said Eleanor. "I should not have thought there was any necessity for it."

"Where are they at this moment?" asked her husband.

"They are staying in the house where they have lived for some time with their father. A friend of theirs, a Mrs. Lucas, who lives close by, is very kind to them. Some plan will have to be made very soon, however, as it so happens that the lease of the house expires shortly. Mr. Trevor had intended moving, just before he was taken ill."

"You have a copy of the will with you?"

"Yes, Sir Henry," answered the lawyer, as he opened his bag, and laid the document on the table. Then he glanced at the clock. "I have to catch a train at Larnham," he said; "I am sorry to be in a

hurry, but I am a busy man. I should have come several days ago, had it not been that business prevented me; and it is imperative that I return to London this evening."

"You will have something to eat before you go," said Sir Henry, rising and ringing the bell. "There is, of course, a good deal to be said on the subject, and I must talk it over with my wife."

"Naturally," replied the lawyer. "And also, Sir Henry, you will understand that you are in no way bound to act in the matter; it can easily be proved that you are not the person mentioned, or intended as guardian, should you prefer to be free from the responsibility; but —" he paused.

"Oh!" said Eleanor, quickly, "I don't think —" and she too stopped and hesitated.

Her husband looked at her, and then said: —

"There is no question of that, I think; but I do not wish to come to any hasty decision. You shall have a telegram on Monday morning."

Eleanor was sitting reading in the drawing-room later in the same evening, when, contrary to his custom, Sir Henry joined her. She had expected him, however, as he had made no allusion to the lawyer's visit during dinner.

"You do not think I should be justified in declining the guardianship?" he said, plunging into the heart of the matter at once.

"No," said Eleanor, "I do not think you would."

"I am glad you agree with me," was his reply. "You see, I inherited everything from my uncle, so I feel I must undertake the rough with the smooth. One has to pay a penalty for being the head of the family."

"From what Mr. Locke said, the girls sound very nice, and I am so sorry for the poor little things left all alone to strangers, — because, after all, you are a stranger to them. I can quite understand they cannot bear to be parted, and I think it was heartless of Lady Vernon to suggest it. Did you never know their father?"

"So far as I can remember," said her husband, "I have never seen him in my life; but I am quite willing to do my best for his girls."

"Well, there is plenty of room here," said Eleanor, after a pause.

Sir Henry started.

"Do you think they need come here?" he asked. "I didn't —"

"What arrangements were you thinking of making?"

"Well, I hardly know," he returned slowly; "but I thought it would not be difficult to place them in some nice family, or something of that kind. I certainly had no thought of asking them here. I have never been used to children."

"How old are they?" she asked, smiling at his tone.

"Mildred is eighteen, and Joan eight, Mr. Locke said. Did you mean to suggest that they should live with us altogether?"

"Doesn't that seem the most obvious thing? We are only two in this large house, and I really think it would be very pleasant to have them. Or, if you preferred it, they could come on a visit to start with, which might be continued indefinitely if the arrangement answered. Or we could discuss it again, if you found you would rather be without them."

Sir Henry looked very worried. If his wife had suggested bringing a troupe of performing apes into the house, he could hardly have looked more distressed.

"I don't understand children," he said again. "I am sure it will be dreadfully disturbing."

Eleanor really felt quite sorry for him.

"Well," she said, "I don't want you to ask them here against your own wish, but really a girl of eighteen is a woman, and I don't think little Joan will be very noisy. You see, she has had no young brothers or sisters, and must have been accustomed to living with older people."

"It has been so delightfully quiet and peaceful," said Sir Henry, regretfully. "I cannot tell you how much I have enjoyed it. But perhaps you have found it a little dull?"

"Not in the least," said Eleanor, quickly. "I think I have enjoyed it every bit as much as you have. I am beginning to love the old place so much, and I quite sympathize with your enjoyment of it, after so many years away from home."

"I think that is why I am so loath to have our life here altered in any way. But perhaps you are right. Anyway, let them come, as you suggest, and we will talk it over again later, if it does not answer."

"Very well," she said. "If you like, I will write to them and make all arrangements. They had better come soon; there is no reason for delay. If you will write to Mr. Locke, you need not trouble about them, but leave it to me to settle."

She smiled as she spoke. She was beginning to understand her husband, she thought.

"Oh, do, please," he said, in obvious relief. "By the way," he continued, "I have had a letter from Minnie to-day. She and my mother want to come down here. You might write to them, if you will. The keeper says there are some pheasants to be shot, and I thought perhaps we might ask a gun or two while they are here. Minnie would find it very dull if we were quite alone, and I suppose the birds must be killed, though I don't want a large party."

"No," said Eleanor. "I should not care about that, for the sake of the girls. They will be in deep

mourning. I suppose you will ask Captain Maitland to shoot?"

"Yes, and the Doctor, I think, and Roger Bolding. That's four guns, with myself. We must try and pick up another; we shall want five, Davis says. What an age it is since I shot a pheasant!"

"I expect you will enjoy it."

Presently his mind returned to the question of his wards, for he said: —

"What shall you do with them all day? It isn't as if it was only for a week, like any other visitors." Then he added suddenly, "I do trust they will not come into the library!" His tone was almost frightened, and Eleanor laughed outright.

"I will promise you they shall not do that, and I really think their presence in the house will not inconvenience you in any way."

Sir Henry did not speak for some time; he sat leaning forward in his chair, his hands clasped in front of him, his thoughts evidently far away. He was never a man of many words, and was inclined to be absent-minded.

"I am sorry he seems to dislike the prospect of the girls' coming so much," she thought; "but he doesn't understand, and takes it for granted that they will be barbarians."

It was delightful to feel that he was so contented, and it would be most unfortunate if the arrival of his wards really disturbed his life in any way.

"Do not have them if you really dislike the idea," she said quietly.

"Oh, no!" he said, "I was not thinking of that. By all means let them come. I am afraid my thoughts had gone a long way back." He hesitated, and then went on, speaking slowly as if he had a difficulty in voicing his thoughts. "Do you know, those years are already beginning to feel like a bad dream? I don't think any one can realize what it is to me to be at home now. You hear of people spending their lives in a foreign country, but I cannot understand how they can ever feel at home there. I had my occupations and my work, of course, but I worked because I had to, and not because I liked it, and I can only say that never for one moment was the life out there anything but distasteful to me. It is true that one did not always feel it as acutely as one did the first year, but it came to be a mechanical life, a sort of treadmill," — he smiled as he spoke. "I think I never lost the feeling of isolation and distance."

Again he hesitated, then continued, speaking rather faster.

"You may wonder at my desiring quiet in my life here, and think I must have had plenty out there, but I can only say that out there it seemed an empty silence, and here, the quiet is so full of interest and thought. In undisturbed leisure, to follow the minds of great thinkers into wider and wider paths, is so ab-

sorbing. It is what I have always so keenly desired to do, that perhaps I may be forgiven if, now that I have the chance of obtaining all that has been denied me hitherto, I am unwilling to lose it, unwilling to let anything interfere with what, to me, is such a real delight. Certainly in my most ambitious moments, and in my most extravagant dreams, I never imagined that I should be the possessor of a library like this." He pointed with his hand in the direction of his room. "I really grudge a moment passed away from my friends in there."

"I quite understand," said Eleanor, gently. "You have got what you always wished for; why shouldn't you enjoy it?"

"More," he said, "more than I ever hoped for."

He sat on without speaking. Eleanor felt touched by what he had just said. He was not a man given to speaking of himself and his own thoughts and fancies, and he had hitherto told her nothing of his years of exile, except in a very general way. Now, for the first time it struck her what he had lost in those years that the locusts had eaten. Where were the dreams and ambitions of his early youth, those visions of literary greatness which he had confided to her so long ago? He had been so full of enthusiasm, so sure of himself, his powers, his future. If any one had suggested to him that he would have reached the age of forty no step nearer the fulfilment of those ambitions, he would

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have scoffed at the idea. Long before then he would have made a name for himself, have given to the world the full harvest of those great thoughts which were struggling for expression in the richness and fertility of his young mind. The seeds would have become flowers, the flowers would have borne fruit, fruit to feed and enrich the generation in which he lived, and the generations yet to be born.

It was as if his few halting words of confidence, the first confidence on this side of that gulf of years, had been a key to unlock a hidden chamber of memory in Eleanor's mind, and as she sat and watched him, lost in thought, recollection after recollection from that chamber crowded into her mind, and with them came a sense of profound pity for this man's wasted youth.

For it was a tragedy. What could be more tragic than such great hopes doomed to wither away to nothing, such profitless years, such a promise in spring and such a dearth in summer. And as she thought, she blamed herself bitterly that she had not realized it before; why had she not done so? The humiliating answer came quickly in response, "Because she had not thought about it!"

It is the answer to the same question so many times in our lives. We so seldom think until some chance word or meeting makes a sudden break and eddy, as it were, in the smooth-running stream of our

mind's advance, and we see that just because of this very smoothness we have missed very, very much.

"Was it possible," she thought, "that if she had fully understood what his exile was, she could have helped him to bear it better?" The thought was painful, she could not answer it. Had she indeed become so self-absorbed, or rather so absorbed in the petty details of daily life, details which already seemed to her rather sordid, that she had never more than touched the outer fringe of the lives of those around her? What had she herself to show for the years that were past? Had her love for her fellows grown stronger? Had her sympathy grown keener? And to these questions the answer came, "No!"

She was perfectly honest with herself. Even a little unjust, it may be, but that was natural to a woman of her temperament. "But now," she told herself, "Henry's chance had come, perhaps hers too. Long delayed, it was true, but surely not too late."

They sat on in the quiet room for a long time, each absorbed in their own thoughts. At last Sir Henry roused himself, and picked up the newspaper from the floor, where it had fallen unheeded. He rose from his chair, preparatory to leaving the room.

"But now," he said earnestly, as if in continuation of his previous words, "I can make up for lost time."

CHAPTER VII

TWO GIRLS AND A DOG

"He is a good dog, and a fair dog,
Can there more be said?"

Merry Wives of Windsor.

THERE was a sound of carriage wheels upon the gravel, the hall door was flung open by Turner and his satellite, and Eleanor moved quickly forward to greet the young arrivals.

As they entered the house, Mildred put her arm protectingly round her sister, and they walked the few steps into the warm comfort of the hall. It was evident that their composure was entirely on the surface.

The older girl held her head erect, while her eyes had an alert, almost defiant expression, as if she had prepared herself to meet any further buffets Fate might have in store. The younger advanced unwillingly, with her eyes lowered, as if all her inclination prompted her to retreat.

Eleanor was truly sorry for the two poor little souls; she kissed them both kindly, and could feel them trembling as she did so. She knew they must be very tired, and not a little nervous, and felt anxious to say

or do something to put them at their ease, but the strength of her desire to comfort them only seemed to drive all the kind words she had meant to say away from her lips. After a short pause, which seemed to her to be of endless duration, she said: —

"You are very welcome. Come close to the fire, and get warm. I am sure you must want your tea."

She could have shaken herself for the utter banality of these remarks, but anything more hearty seemed perfectly impossible to her in the shyness which overwhelmed them, all three. So she busied herself in helping them to unfasten their wraps, drawing them nearer to the cheerful hearth as she did so. Suddenly, she felt a movement almost under her feet, and nearly tripped over something.

"What is it?" she asked, rather startled.

"It is Alphonse Daudet," said Joan, speaking for the first time. "He is so dreadfully cold and miserable."

The child spoke with tears in her voice, as if she thoroughly endorsed the opinion, and before Eleanor could reply, a small, shivering grey poodle crept from the shelter of his mistress to the warmth of the hearth, where he crouched in a dejected attitude.

"He is really quite quiet and good," said Mildred. "I hope you do not mind him. We have had him a long time, and he is never any trouble. We could not bear to leave him behind."

"Of course not," said Eleanor, stoutly. "I am sure you are very fond of him."

In her heart she was wondering how her husband would receive this unexpected addition to his household. Two girls and a dog was certainly trying him rather high. Would it be possible to suggest a comfortable lodging in the stables, she thought? But she did not mention it, she really did not dare, for as she looked at Joan, she saw that the child was crouching on the floor beside the dog, as if she feared some such suggestion might be made, and her lip was quivering, as if she were on the point of bursting into tears.

Eleanor felt quite distracted. What was to be done? Anything was better than that catastrophe; but oh! if only the solid hearthstone would open and swallow the dejected Alphonse Daudet, before the master of the house caught sight of him!

At that moment the library door opened, and Sir Henry walked towards them.

"So you have arrived," he said, in his usual quiet tones. "I hope you have had a good journey, and are not very cold."

"No, thank you," said the girls, speaking together. Then Mildred added shyly, "It is very good of you to let us come."

They sat down again; this time Joan was sitting on the sofa beside her sister. Sir Henry drank his tea,

and chatted easily, asking questions about their changes, and so forth, and Eleanor breathed more freely for a while. Evidently the unwelcome guest was not going to make himself obtrusive; perhaps he might even escape notice.

"Have you been used to the country?" she asked. "If you are fond of animals, there are plenty here to amuse you. There is a charming family of kittens in the stables; I saw them this morning. You must have a good look round to-morrow."

"There is a pony too, isn't there, Eleanor?" asked Sir Henry. "I have no doubt it is quiet enough for them to drive, if they care to do so."

Just then Eleanor chanced to look up, and for a moment she held her breath. There, in the middle of the hearthrug, within two feet of Sir Henry, sitting bolt upright, was Alphonse Daudet. The warmth and the alluring scent of muffins had evidently restored his lost courage, and he was doing his level best to show off his company manners. Over his left eye hung rakishly a bedraggled black bow, which tied up his topknot, and his long silky ears depended in Early Victorian ringlets on either side of his impudent little face. The eye that was not obscured by the sign of mourning was fixed on Sir Henry, and gleamed with piteous entreaty. His small, clammy black nose twitched with agonized longing. The mixture of dejection and hope which was plainly

written in his whole appearance was inexpressibly ludicrous.

Sir Henry stooped forward as if unable to classify the weird object which met his gaze, and in response, Alphonse beat the air with a convulsive movement of his forepaws. No one spoke. The moment was all-important. Grave issues were at stake. The fate of Alphonse Daudet hung in the balance.

Eleanor did not dare to move. Then Sir Henry with great deliberation broke off a piece of his bread and butter, and laid it with infinite gentleness on the tip of the twitching little black nose. Another moment, and the tempting morsel had been tossed high, caught, and had disappeared from view. Sir Henry burst out laughing. A hearty laugh, which quite startled Eleanor, for even as they all joined in it, she realized that it was the first she had ever heard from her husband.

"What is his name?" he asked, and on being told, said gravely that he trusted that its owner would live up to his high-sounding patronymic.

Emboldened by the manner in which her pet had been received, Joan crept forward to Sir Henry's side, and kneeling beside him urged Alphonse to give an exhibition of his talents. He died, he came to life again at the magic word "Policeman." He danced, he sneezed, he said "Please," only pausing between each item of his programme to swallow tempting

morsels with the rapidity of a machine and the precision of a letter-box, and, finally, he hurled himself against Sir Henry's knees, and bowed his head between his forepaws, in an attitude of silent prayer.

Then, after a slight pause, he stretched himself on the rug, his pink tongue lolling out, his tail wagging deliriously, and his breath coming in quick, ecstatic pants. He was overcome with the success of his entertainment, the very picture of satisfied joy.

When recalling the scene, Eleanor felt as if nothing could be too great a reward for Monsieur Daudet, for the way in which he had saved the situation. It was impossible for any one to feel stiff or shy after they had laughed so heartily at the antics of this colossal jester, and the jester himself was only too aware that his had been the triumph and his alone was all the glory. And there was not the slightest doubt that Sir Henry had been thoroughly entertained. He had praised and caressed and rewarded, all to Joan's huge delight.

"Where did you get him?" he asked.

"Jim gave him to me; he said he had a very good character from his last situation, and followed like an unpaid bill. I don't quite know what he meant, but then I don't sometimes know what Jim does mean. But Alphonse always is good, except when he has an attack of mental abrasion."

"Really!" said Sir Henry. "You don't say so!"

"Yes," said Joan, confidentially; "he goes off his

chump, you know. Just races round and round and round, until he feels better, and then he sits down."

"Joany!" expostulated Mildred, "Sir Henry won't like that dreadful slang."

"On the contrary, I find it most interesting," he said, smiling. "But who is Jim?"

"Oh! Jim is — Jim!" answered the child, as if that explained everything. Then she added, "His mother is Mrs. Lucas, and he is a great friend of mine."

"Mr. Locke told us about Mrs. Lucas," said Eleanor; "so I have heard of her."

"The Lucases have been very kind to us," explained Mildred; "we have seen a great deal of them, and Jim has always been most awfully fond of Joan."

"Did you teach Monsieur Daudet all these tricks yourself, Joan?" asked Sir Henry.

"Oh, no, Jim taught him. Isn't he clever? Do you know, he lived in a very grand house before he came to us, and it was some time before he would even walk up and down stairs, and he never would walk in the street for a long time. He sat down and barked for the footman to carry him up to bed at night. We hadn't got a footman, you know, only a boot boy, and Alphonse turned up his nose at him. One day when we were out walking, we passed a grand carriage and pair, standing in front of a house, and he jumped in and hopped up on to the front seat, as much as to say, 'At last I am in my proper place.'

It really was very funny, but the old gentleman only laughed. Do you think you could shave him for us?"

"Shave him?" repeated Sir Henry, rather helplessly.

"Yes," continued the child; "I have brought his clippers. You see — Jim used to shave him for me" — her voice faltered for a moment, then she went on bravely; "but now Jim isn't here, and I don't think I could quite do it myself. You see, his bare part is quite easy, but you must be careful to leave his whatnots the right shape."

"His whatnots!" repeated Sir Henry. He seemed to be quite at sea.

"Yes; these little tufts on his back are his whatnots. But if you would rather not," Joan said politely, "I expect I can manage them all right."

Eleanor felt it was time to come to her husband's rescue!

"We will consult Dobbs to-morrow," she said. "Dobbs is the coachman, and I daresay we shall find that he knows all about it."

"An excellent idea," said Sir Henry, much relieved. The shape of the whatnots had evidently been more than he felt equal to undertaking.

"Oh, yes, we will ask Dobbs; that will be much better," said Joan. Then she added, "You won't mind his sleeping in my room? I have brought his blanket, and he very seldom snores. You see, I take

my hair-brush to bed with me, and throw it at him if he does, which is quite a good plan, except when I lie on it by mistake."

She looked anxiously at Sir Henry, awaiting his reply.

"I don't think there can be any objection to that, can there, Eleanor?" he asked, smiling. "It is possible that the hair-brush might make more noise than Alphonse Daudet, but we must hope for the best."

"I expect he will sleep soundly to-night, after his journey," said Eleanor. "And to-morrow he can see how he likes country life. Now you had better come upstairs, and see your rooms."

And so, thanks in no small measure to Alphonse Daudet, the ice was broken, and in a very few days the three settled happily into their new life at 'Trevor Lordship.' On the day after their arrival, Eleanor had a long talk with the girls, and told them quite plainly that there was only one thing that they might not do, and that was, disturb Sir Henry. His library was a sacred spot, on no account to be entered except in the unlikely event of their receiving an invitation to do so. They both at once promised to remember this rule, and Eleanor felt satisfied that the matter was settled, once and for all.

As she had prophesied, their presence made very little difference to the master of the house, and he

seemed to enjoy their company when he saw them, which was seldom, except at meals.

Mildred was rather shy of him at first, but little Joan seemed to consider that after his reception of her pet, they were sworn allies. Joan was altogether a friendly little person, and was soon on the best of terms with every one, including Dobbs, to whom the question of the whatnots did not seem to present the same difficulty as to Sir Henry. The child had seen very little real country, and her days were spent in ecstatic raptures over every animal on the place.

On their first Sunday, Eleanor noticed with some amusement that on coming out of church, Joan ran up to Sir Henry, and, taking his hand in her confidential, childish way, announced that she was going to walk home with him. This she did, chattering gaily all the time.

When they reached the house, Joan said contentedly:

"I have settled it all. He's going to be our uncle. It has been rather difficult, because I do think Sir Henry" (she pronounced it Senery, all in one word), "sounds like a vegetable, don't you? and Mildred said it was rude to say 'him' all the time, but now he's our uncle it makes it quite right, and you'll be our aunt too, won't you? That will be quite comfy."

Eleanor and Mildred laughed, and agreed it was a very good idea.

CHAPTER VIII

FRESH FIELDS AND PASTURES NEW

"Such stuff the world is made of."

—COWPER.

MISS PRICE'S words, "You may see many things that surprise you," returned to Eleanor's mind very forcibly when she first saw her husband's relations; and the person who occasioned her most surprise was her sister-in-law, Minnie Ross. She had not unnaturally expected to find her a woman of her own age and standing, and had been almost speechless with astonishment when Mrs. Trevor arrived, accompanied by some one who, at the first glance, looked about three and twenty.

Even among her own friends, Minnie (every one called her Minnie) was pointed out as being an extraordinarily young-looking woman, and with reason. She was altogether of a type with which Eleanor was unacquainted, a modern of the moderns, and if that odious term "smart" was deserved by any one, it was richly deserved by Minnie. She was "smart" to her carefully manicured finger-tips! How she would have loved to hear you say so! Nothing could have pleased her more. After all, it is some-

thing to attain the summit of your ambitions, even if that summit isn't very exalted. It is the position that brings the satisfaction, not the altitude. Her friends were in the habit of saying, "Jolly little sort, Minnie; very smart indeed, but no harm in Minnie, oh, dear, no!"

She was charmingly pretty, petite and vivacious, with a mass of soft brown hair which fluffed when fluffs were the thing, and rippled when the wave of fashion broke into ripples. She changed her style of hair-dressing about as often as she did the cut of her skirt, and somehow each change became her better than the one before. She knew well enough that if the "habit makes the monk," clothes make a smart woman, and, being really an artist in her own line, the clothes' line, was always perfectly turned out. Above all, she was thoroughly aware of her own attractiveness, and used the knowledge as a skilful fencer uses his foil.

It was rather surprising that this, being the case, she was so popular; but even women liked Minnie, and forgave her for cutting them out. She was so childishly pleased with herself, and so willing to let other people do as they liked, provided she might do the same. She never said spiteful things, and was thoroughly good-natured; the truth being that she was far too much wrapped up in her frivolous little self, and her frivolous little affairs, to have any time

to spare for the business of her neighbours. So easily is a reputation for good nature won, in a world where you may be forgiven for being a kitten, but never for being a cat!

As a matter of fact, if there was any one who was placed in Minnie's affections besides Minnie herself, it was her own husband, but he came in such a bad second as to be almost out of the running.

Hugh Ross was at this time stationed in India, a country which his wife associated with Black Holes and lost complexions, and classed as "impossible." There was a pleasant understanding that she was on a visit to her mother, until she should join her husband, but she never for a moment intended doing so. It was really more than any man could expect. And if sometimes in the back of her mind she wished he were not so far away, the wish was prompted more by the feeling that it was useful to have a man belonging to you, than by any desire for him, Hugh Ross, in person, and this only happened when she was bored, which wasn't often. She took very good care not to be, and on the whole succeeded remarkably well.

Mrs. Trevor adored her, and allowed her to do anything she liked, which was perhaps wise, as it is very doubtful if any other course would have been practicable. It may be that the old lady was shrewd enough to know this, for while presenting a stern and un-

bending front to all the world, and frowning portentously on its every foible, she was all smiles and yielding affection to her only daughter.

In conversation with her friends she always alluded to Minnie's approaching departure for India, saying, "A wife's place is with her husband, of course, and dear Minnie will do what is right, but it will be a terrible wrench, etc., etc." But this highly moral statement was wearing so thin as to allow her auditors to obtain a glimpse of the truth, which was, that the old lady assisted to paint the picture of the burning East in lurid colours, having not the slightest intention of parting with Minnie if she could help it.

It was in accordance with her rule never to be bored, that Minnie had, with admirable forethought, arranged for her own amusement during her stay at 'Trevor Lordship.' She was curious to see her brother and his wife in their new home, but from what she had seen of Henry in London, it seemed highly probable that the visit would be extremely dull, and being wise in her generation, she had provided herself with an antidote, in the shape of a certain Mr. Vane-Talbert, familiarly known as Toby.

On the morning of her arrival, Sir Henry had been surprised to receive a telegram from her, saying, "Bringing Toby Vane-Talbert, do give him a shoot." Who Toby Vane-Talbert was, neither Sir Henry nor

Eleanor had the vaguest idea, but in any case it was too late for a return telegram.

Minnie explained him to Eleanor later, in her usual airy way.

"He knows every one, you know, and goes everywhere, and is always so nice and useful. His father was Lord Philip Vane-Talbert, you know. Toby was in the House for a bit, but he chucked it. He lost his wife about two years ago, poor thing. He really is a dear boy."

The term seemed to Eleanor a little inappropriate, as she thought Mr. Vane-Talbert's farewell to his boyhood must have been said some years ago; but it was difficult to fix his age, he might have been anything between eight and twenty and eight and forty. He was small and spare, and very neat,—neat black hair, neat black moustache, neat clothes, neat movements. His manners were charming, very charming; it was his particular rôle to be all things to all women, and to speak to each as if she alone were his bright particular star; they liked it, and it might mean anything or nothing.

The only other guest was Roger Bolding, a bachelor squire, who lived in a house called Haines Hall, about eight miles from 'Trevor Lordship.' His elder brother, since dead, had been a Cambridge friend of Henry Trevor's, and on hearing of his coming to the neighbourhood Bolding had hastened to be friendly, at first for his brother's sake, and later for his own.

He was a tall man of about five and thirty, with good, clear-cut features; his clean-shaven face was exactly the type of the "bloods" of Beau Brummel's time, and looked as if he ought to wear ruffles and powdered hair; strong, energetic, and resourceful, far quicker than his rather heavy build led one to suppose. He was about the best known man in the county, and about the most popular, for he was a thorough sportsman and a first-rate rider. In addition to these qualifications, he was possessed of that cheery, cordial manner which goes such a long way in winning the friendship of rich and poor alike.

As Eleanor sat at the head of her table on the first evening, she felt as if she were watching some very entertaining play. Up to the present time, dinner had been a very quiet meal, although conducted with a good deal of pomp by Mr. Turner, who had his own opinion as to how "things should be done." Since Mildred's arrival, the order of things had been a little more cheerful, but to-night was a new departure. She looked round the table, with its load of beautiful old silver and glass, its vases of hothouse flowers, and the note of comfort, almost amounting to luxury, appealed to her as something novel and very pleasant. She was entirely ignorant of the hundred and one slang terms which are in everyday use in certain circles, and sometimes found it quite difficult to understand the meaning they were intended to convey, but she noticed

that Mildred and Roger Bolding, and even Captain Maitland, seemed to find it quite natural.

Minnie and Mr. Bolding had met before, and had mutual friends, and as the party was small enough to admit of general conversation, the ball of small-talk was kept rolling merrily enough. Eleanor was studying her sister-in-law in admiration and bewilderment. Was it possible that that beautiful girl, for she looked little more in the subdued light of the shaded candles, could be within two years of her own age?

Minnie had glided down to dinner, rather late,—she was thoroughly aware how effective it is to time your entry so that all may be assembled to admire,—in a shimmering gown of white and silver, with a diaphanous scarf draped over her shoulders, as was the fashion of the moment. A rope of pearls hung round her neck, and a large diamond crescent was perched in her fluffy hair. Fluffs were the thing just then! She really made a charming picture, and knew it, and now there she was, sitting between Roger Bolding and Captain Maitland, chattering and laughing with all the spirit of a girl of sixteen. Mildred Trevor was pretty, in a fresh, girlish way, but undoubtedly to-night, in her black frock, she only served as a foil to the glitter of this white and silver butterfly.

If Eleanor's surprise at her sister-in-law's appearance had been great, it was equally a fact that Mrs.

Trevor and Minnie felt the same, so far as she was concerned. Mrs. Trevor had become thoroughly imbued with the idea that her son was making a misalliance in marrying a woman whom no one had ever heard of, and Minnie shared this opinion. They both felt that nobody could be anybody who did not spend at least three months of the year within the limits of Belgravia or Mayfair. However, this conviction was destined to be rudely shaken.

Mrs. Trevor, as she made somewhat laboured conversation with her son and host, raised her lorgnettes more than once to fix a direct and scrutinizing glance on her new daughter-in-law, and before dinner was over she was forced to admit that, so far as she could see, Eleanor as hostess left very little to be desired.

She had come prepared to cavil, but so far had found nothing to cavil at, and was consequently feeling a little disappointed. She had been met at the station by a comfortable carriage, she had been received with due ceremony, as became her importance, her room was well arranged, and now she was enjoying, yes! positively enjoying, an excellent dinner. If her host's conversation was a little uninteresting, well! after all, he was her own son, and the woman was handsome! positively handsome!

Old Miss Price would have rubbed her hands together, as was her wont when pleased, if she had been there to see, and indeed, the friends of Eleanor's

early womanhood would hardly have recognized her this evening. She was dressed in a simple, well-made gown of black velvet, relieved with a berthe of old lace which had belonged to her mother. She wore no jewels, but her neck and shoulders were beautifully moulded, and her dress accentuated their ivory whiteness. Her hair was no longer drawn tightly back from her forehead, but arranged in a heavy coil like a diadem on the top of her head, by the hands of her maid, — a young woman, it would appear, who thoroughly knew her business.

The quiet happiness of the months of her married life had restored the colour to her cheeks and smoothed the tired lines from her face. Her expression was gentle still, but far more animated than before. Oh, yes! Miss Price would have been quite satisfied.

"I hear Willie Gould is broke. Is it true?" asked Bolding.

"Quite true," said Minnie, cheerfully. "Liabilities four thousand, and assets one pound!"

"Good fellow, Willie," said Vane-Talbert. "Plucky chap, you know! I met him in Piccadilly yesterday, and said I was awfully sorry to hear he had had such rotten luck. But he laughed, and said, 'My dear chap, the only rotten luck about it is their finding that sovereign! If I'd found it, I shouldn't have gone.'"

"Courage worthy of a better cause," said Bolding. "Where is he now?"

"Oh! he's still in his rooms in Jermyn Street. Wish I could get hold of that valet of his. An invaluable chap; gets no wages, and goes out waiting when times are bad, so I've always heard. One thing you may be certain of is that Willie will come up smiling."

"He will come into some money by and by," said Minnie. "He's got an old aunt who sends him tracts and a knitted waistcoat at Christmas."

"Wish I'd got an old aunt. I'd wind wool, or push a bath-chair for any old lady who'd assure my future."

"Don't you worry, Toby," laughed Minnie. "You can take to giving Bridge lessons at £5 an afternoon. Lilly Carey has got a man to teach her. She says he's too lovely, and that his conversation is cheap at the price."

"I don't fancy his job," he said lightly. "Half an hour of Lilly Carey is as much as I can do with."

"Why not turn chauffeur," said Mildred. "It's ripping work, I believe, and very good pay."

"Topping! I'll ply for hire when I get my new car. It ought to be a flier."

"A new motor sounds a long way from bankruptcy, Mr. Vane-Talbert," said Eleanor, smiling.

"On the contrary, Lady Trevor," he replied quickly,

"the one leads to the other, and they are intimately connected. The other day some one asked what had been the most fashionable things this year, and was told, Motors and Mortgages. Every one has one or the other, and some people both."

"I wish yours would come, Toby," said Minnie. "I want you to teach me how to drive it."

"You wouldn't like it," he returned. "You mustn't talk when you're learning to drive. Look at Lord Cawston. Took his best girl for a drive the other day, and took her clean into the river, down by Datchett. She hasn't spoken to him since."

"How pleased Lady Cawston must have been," laughed Minnie.

"She was! She said she would never prevent his taking any of his charmers out again."

"Have you got the Bridge fever, Lady Trevor?" continued Vane-Talbert.

"Well," she said, "I don't play Bridge, if that is what you mean, but I should not think there would be any difficulty in learning, for I have played Whist all my life, and very strict Whist, too."

"You'll have to learn," said Minnie. "You have to play now if you want to go anywhere at all. If you can't play, you're out of it."

"Yes," said Vane-Talbert, "and if you can play, play well, I mean, it doesn't matter who you are, you get asked everywhere. I met a most weird lady at

Mrs. Tommy Deacon's the other day, the sort of old thing Mrs. Tommy wouldn't have looked at a year ago. And when I asked who she was, I was told in an awed whisper that she was the best Bridge player in London, and that people were wild to get her. Mrs. Tommy seemed very cock-a-hoop at having caught her."

"In fact, the Bridge that spans the social gulf," said Bolding.

"And takes you over the river of boredom," added Minnie. "Think of those awful hours one used to spend after dinner in country houses, the men half asleep and wholly dull, and the women snappy. Now you play Bridge, and every one is pleased."

"Except those who don't play," suggested Eleanor.

"Oh! we all play," said Minnie, lightly. "I went down to stay at Oversham for the hunt ball, and after tea some one suggested Bridge, so we made up five tables, and started. The next thing was, that the butler came in to ask if we would like supper. It was eleven o'clock, and too late for the ball. We had supper, and played until 3.30."

"I should have been asleep," said Eleanor.

"I should have been too hungry to sleep," laughed Mildred. "I should have been screaming for a mutton chop."

When the ladies reached the drawing-room, Mrs. Trevor turned to her daughter-in-law, and said, abruptly: —

"Where are the diamonds?"

"Diamonds!" said Eleanor, rather taken aback.

"Yes, where are the diamonds?" demanded the old lady again.

Eleanor felt as if she ought to put her hand in her pocket, and produce them. There was a stand-and-deliver air about the enquiry which was quite disconcerting.

"You haven't got any on. Where are they?"

"I don't possess any," said Eleanor, "or I should certainly wear them."

"Yes, but the family diamonds! My sister-in-law had plenty; they must have been left to Henry."

"Oh!" said Eleanor, "I see. No, I have never heard of them."

"Aunt Elizabeth had some very fair jewels," said Minnie, who was standing in front of the fire, stirring her coffee, while Mildred was crouched on the rug, balancing grains of sugar on Alphonse Daudet's nose. "The last time I saw her was at a crush in London, and she was encased in maroon velvet, positively blistered with diamonds. Poor dear, she was huge, and looked like a large plum jelly, half melted. Do you remember, Mamma?"

"Yes! She was stout, but she had very fine diamonds." Mrs. Trevor spoke almost regretfully. The diamonds were evidently on her mind.

"She had a huge star," continued Minnie, "and wore it perched on the apex of her lower chest! The effect was certainly startling. No joke intended," she added, as a little chuckle came from Mildred. "But seriously, Eleanor, where are the jewels?"

"You must ask Henry," Eleanor said, smiling.

"What a funny woman you are! I shouldn't have slept a night in this house before they were safely under my pillow. I adore diamonds! Eleanor," she added suddenly, "why don't you cut Henry's hair?"

Eleanor was beginning to feel as if she was playing at a game of surprise questions.

"Does it want cutting?" she asked.

"Want cutting!" ejaculated Minnie, with her high laugh. "He looks like an organ-grinder. Do you know," she paused, — reflectively, — "I almost think that if you broke Henry's spectacles and cut his hair, he might be quite good-looking. Why don't you?"

"I don't think I should like to suggest it."

"Oh! I will," said Minnie, cheerfully. "You leave it to me."

"Oh! don't," said Eleanor, quickly. "I am sure he wouldn't like it."

She was rather embarrassed at this calm discussion of her husband's personal appearance.

"I shall ask him about the diamonds," announced Mrs. Trevor.

It might have been supposed that she had a personal interest in the matter, in fact, Eleanor rather wondered if her husband ought not to offer some of them to his relations.

But Sir Henry apparently had his own ideas on the subject. He seemed surprised at the question which his mother hurled at him the moment he entered the room, but he answered without hesitation.

"Diamonds — yes, certainly. They are in the strong room, two jewel cases, and a box which the lawyer said contained lace."

"Fetch them," said his mother. "I should like to see them."

"They are quite safe," he replied. Then he turned to his wife. "I am sorry to have been so remiss, Eleanor," he said. "They of course belong to you. You shall have them to-morrow."

"Oh! don't you think they are much safer locked away?" Eleanor returned.

"You must have them," he answered. "You can lock them away later if you like, but they are yours. I am only sorry that I required reminding."

He spoke courteously, but quite firmly, and made it evident that the matter was no concern of either Mrs. Trevor's or Minnie's, so their curiosity had perforce to remain unsatisfied.

"I see you have a Browning here, Lady Trevor," said Captain Maitland, presently. "Are you going to join the Browning Society?"

"No," said Eleanor; "I really don't think I can. Mrs. Stephens asked me, but I don't think I feel equal to it."

"It is not the first attempt at a literary society which Mrs. Stephens has started," said the Captain, with a twinkle in his eyes. "They die an early death."

"Can you honestly understand Browning, Lady Trevor?" asked Roger Bolding, taking up the book. "I must confess it does seem rot to me. Just look here," — and he read: —

> "'It was roses, roses all the way,
> With myrtle mixed in my path like mad,
> The house roofs seemed to twist and sway,
> The church spires flamed, such flags they had
> A year ago to-day.'"

"Sounds like recollections of a night out," said Vane-Talbert.

"He must have been very drunk," murmured Minnie, sweetly.

"Blind!" said Vane-Talbert, laconically, as he crossed the room to speak to Mildred. Captain Maitland was talking to Sir Henry, and Roger Bolding and Eleanor were still standing by the

table, he with Browning in his hand, and a whimsical expression on his face.

"Now, without chaff, — I am not a scoffer, Lady Trevor, — but is there really a single verse in this book comprehendible by the average male intelligence?"

"Oh, yes!" said Eleanor, with a smile, — she liked Roger Bolding, — "there are some beautiful bits, quite simple and straightforward. My favourite lines of all are Browning's."

"What are they?"

He was standing in front of her, a tall and virile figure, with the frank expression in his eyes that made him so attractive. And Eleanor repeated them.

"One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break.
Never dreamed tho' right were worsted, wrong would triumph;
Held, we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake."

Her colour rose a little as she recited the lines, for she was not accustomed to revealing her inmost thoughts, but she never faltered, her gentle voice giving due force to the words, and her grey eyes holding his, or held by his, until the end.

"Ah!" he said. Then he took a sheet of paper from the table. "Will you write it down?"

"Yes. I am glad you like them," she said simply.

He did not answer as he took the paper from her, folded it, and put it in his pocket. Then Minnie's voice broke in.

"Mr. Bolding! Come and make a fourth. Henry says he doesn't play, but Mildred will. We must have a game."

CHAPTER IX

A CONVERSATION AND A MEETING

"Thought once awakened does not again slumber."
— CARLYLE.

"SHE'S a ridic'lus thing, and I hate her!" said Joan, vehemently.

The shooters had returned from a good morning's sport, and were assembled in the hall waiting for the announcement of luncheon, when the front door was flung violently open, and the child burst in. Her face matched her scarlet cap in colour, her mane of hair streamed behind her, while Alphonse Daudet tore round her like a small whirlwind, giving vent to his sympathy in short, excited barks.

"Whatever is the matter?" cried Eleanor and Mildred, together.

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!" said Bolding, "who do you want shot? I'm here."

Joan threw down her school books, and burst into a torrent of explanation.

"I know what 'horse' is, and I know I'm quite right — 'tisn't as if I didn't know French — and it wasn't Daudet's fault if the chicken stuck in the wire, and pulled his stupid tail out."

"His tail seems all right," said Vane-Talbert, consolingly. "It wags much as usual."

"It wasn't his tail, it was the chicken's that came out," sobbed Joan. "And Mrs. Rector says he mustn't never come to school with me any more, and as for that stupid Ma'mselle, I hate her. She don't know her own language."

"Suppose you try and tell us what really happened," said Eleanor, drawing the child on to her knee, while Mildred wiped the tears from the flushed little face.

"Where has she been?" asked Mrs. Trevor. "She is terribly excited. She ought to be taught self-control."

"She goes to lessons with the Rectory children," explained Eleanor, "and has been so happy up to now. What has Alphonse Daudet got to do with 'horse,' and what is all this about the chicken's tail?"

Joan grew calmer by slow degrees, and presently an explanation was forthcoming.

"Well, you know we had French translation, and it was about 'horse,' and I wrote it quite neatly, there wasn't no blots, and when that Ma'mselle saw it, she just screamed with laughing, and wouldn't say why! Then we looked out of the window, and there was Phonso talking to a chicken; he was only quite polite, but the fool thing squawked, and ran, and then of course he ran too, and Mr. and

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Mrs. Rector was running after him, and then the fool chicken put its head through the wire netting, and when Mr. Rector came, somehow his tail was in poor Phonso's mouth. And they said he mustn't never come no more!" Tears were perilously near again. "And he is so polite to chickens!"

"Never mind," said Mildred, soothingly; "I'll take him for his walk in the mornings."

"When that was over," continued Joan, "I was feeling most upset, and that grinning Ma'mselle was giggling so I could have shied a book at her, so I just scrambled my things together, and ran home. All she would say was, 'Ah! Mon Dieu! Cheval! quel enfant!'"

"Have you got the book here?" asked Eleanor. "Let us see what you wrote."

It was produced, and there in Joan's round and laborious writing was the mystic sentence:—

"Je suis si cheval que je ne puis pas hirondelle."

Mildred read it aloud, and there was a shout of laughter from every one.

"Oh! don't laugh at her," said Eleanor, quickly. "Don't you see, Joan, that—"

"Oh! I don't mind your laughing," interrupted Joan, with dignity. "My friends may laugh at me, but not that horrid Ma'mselle."

"But this is *hoarse*, sore-throat hoarse, dear child, not the four-legged horse."

"Sounds just the same," returned Joan, obstinately.

"I quite agree with you!" said Bolding. "Horse is horse."

"That's just what Lavender said."

"What did Lavender say?"

"She said that to her mind horse was horse, call it what you liked. She said it was the same with an ass. 'Some calls it donkey, and some calls it moke, but it weren't no more than a ass'!" said Joan, dropping into the vernacular. "She said if she were me, she wouldn't go for to worry myself about a thing what would blow over. A horse can't blow over, and I know it's *cheval*, 'cause Jim says he is going to mount a cheval, when he is going riding. But Lavender gave me this."

She held out her hand, in the palm of which lay a large striped bull's eye. It looked very sticky, for fragments were adhering to it, and here and there could be plainly seen the prints of Joan's firm white teeth.

"Ah!" said Sir Henry, "sweet consolation! I agree with Lavender, I shouldn't worry about it any more. Come in to luncheon."

"It reminds me of being swished at my private school for translating 'Hors de combat' as war-horse," said Roger Bolding. "The authorities refused to believe it was innocence and not guile."

"I will go down this afternoon," said Eleanor,

"and investigate the damage done by Alphonse Daudet's conversation with the chicken, and soothe the ruffled feelings of Mademoiselle at the same time."

After luncheon Joan was allowed to go out with the shooters, to her great delight, and she started off holding Sir Henry's hand, and chattering as gaily as if the morning's storm had never raged, and horses and chickens had no place in her small world. Minnie and Mildred followed with the rest of the guns, and Eleanor was left to entertain her mother-in-law.

Mrs. Trevor seated herself by the drawing-room fire, and, after a prolonged search for such things as spectacles, knitting, and footstool, announced that there were several things she did not understand.

She generally began her sentences with "I do not understand," in a tone which suggested that the implied ignorance on her part was entirely due to the want of frankness on other people's. She then ran through various subjects on which she required enlightment. The presence of Mildred and Joan at 'Trevor Lordship' was one, and Eleanor gave her a full and particular account of the events which had led to their coming. It was punctuated at intervals by sniffs from the old lady. It is astonishing how much meaning can be conveyed by a sniff, by any one who is really an expert in this medium of expression.

Mrs. Trevor was a past master in the art, and had command of a very varied selection, all distinct and unmistakable. At first Eleanor found it embarrassing, but after a while she learnt to distinguish, and be prepared for the particular kind of sniff which the subject demanded.

Minnie didn't like her remarks greeted with this form of comment, and had no hesitation in saying so, and Mrs. Trevor took great pains not to indulge in the habit when her daughter was present, but on this occasion there was nothing to prevent her expressing herself in any way she liked, so she took every advantage of it. The subject of the girls was punctuated with sniff scornful.

The next topic was Minnie herself, and Eleanor was treated to the usual highly moral remarks. "Dear Minnie will do what is right, of course — a wife's place is with her husband — but the wrench of parting will be terrible — " accompanied by a running obligato of sniffs of the righteous and sympathetic order. Eleanor hadn't heard it before, she didn't know Mrs. Trevor well enough, so she listened with great respect, and was duly impressed.

The old lady really enjoyed being able to let herself go, and enlarged on her favourite theme — Minnie's beauty — Minnie's popularity — Minnie's wonderful cleverness — until even she felt she had said all there was to say. It was a real treat to her

to be listened to, not only with attention, but with interest, and Eleanor really was interested.

Then Mrs. Trevor switched the stream of her eloquence on to another line.

"I do not understand," she said majestically, "what you and Henry intend to do."

"In what way?" enquired Eleanor, politely.

"Well, are you coming to London in the spring, or not? He told me last night that at present he had no intention of doing so, but I do not understand your being willing to bury yourselves in the country."

"I love this place, and Henry is so interested in his library and his writing, that I am sure he would not care for a London season."

"Now, that is another thing I wish to speak to you about," said her mother-in-law, firmly. "It undoubtedly is your duty to take your proper position, and to see that Henry takes his. I can quite understand why you married him, and consider that you were quite wise. This house, and six thousand pounds a year, made him a very good *parti*."

"Mrs. Trevor!" said Eleanor, indignantly. "How can you say such a thing? We had been engaged for years!"

"Oh! I know there was some silly understanding many years ago; but of course you would never have married if he had not come into this. I am not blaming you! far from it! I think you acted very

rightly; every woman who isn't a fool does the best she can for herself; but you need not pretend to me for a moment that you and Henry are in love with each other, because that is, of course, absurd. You have only got to look at Henry! Although he is my own son, I cannot imagine any woman in love with him. Oh, dear, no! — and a calm respect wears much better."

Eleanor did not speak, she felt that her only safety lay in silence, and Mrs. Trevor continued speaking, apparently quite unaware of the emotions she was arousing in the mind of her listener.

"And now that you are his wife, it is your duty to take your proper position in the County, and to see that Henry takes his. Of course, reading and writing are well enough in their way, most useful, I am sure, but you must see that Henry is reasonable. It would be terrible if he got the name of being a recluse or eccentric. He was always apt to be in the clouds; we used to call him Johnny Head-in-Air when he was a child. But now that he has this house and property," — Mrs. Trevor waved her hand in a movement which apparently included heaven and earth, — "he really must take his position." Sniff determined!

"I am sure he will do what he thinks right," said Eleanor, rather stiffly. She hardly liked to get up and put an abrupt end to the conversation, as her inclination prompted her to do.

"He ought to go in for County things, Magistrates' benches, and Committees, and that kind of thing. And I do hope you will be careful to know the right people. Now there is Lady Yarfield, she would be most helpful. Have you met her?"

"Yes, she called a few days ago."

Eleanor was feeling too crushed by Mrs. Trevor's late remarks to recount the story of the visit which had afforded her and Mildred immense amusement at the time. The truth being, that the lady in question had whirled up in a motor, and rushed into the house for exactly ten minutes by the clock; during which time she had poured out a plaintive history about the loss of her favourite dog, and a picture which she had just had painted of him. She had remarked pathetically, "I assure you, dear Lady Trevor, it is so life-like, that when I go into the room I can smell him! I can indeed!" She had not given Eleanor the impression of being a helpful person, under any circumstances.

"Who else has called?"

Eleanor mentioned some names, and fortunately there happened to be one or two ladies of title among them, so Mrs. Trevor seemed satisfied that they were the right people.

"I do not understand why he wears spectacles," was the next question.

"He hurt his eyes some time ago, and has worn

them ever since; but I think he ought to see a good oculist now that he has come home."

"I shall insist upon his doing so. I do trust you will make him look more like other people! As Minnie said the other night, his hair is too long. I should be greatly disturbed if he was thought odd in any way!"

Eleanor laughed, she really couldn't help it.

"I don't think you need be afraid."

"He looks so much too old. He looks sixty!" Mrs. Trevor was becoming quite depressed. "I married at twenty, and he was born the next year. He had nice fat legs, and was no trouble to feed. I do not understand why Minnie has no child! I don't think she feels it as much as I do, for nowadays women don't seem to be interested in a nursery, and certainly it might spoil her figure."

The old voice rippled on, and gradually grew fainter and fainter, the sniffs became snores, and presently Mrs. Trevor was sound asleep. Eleanor rose, quickly and noiselessly, and fled from the room. A few minutes later she was walking briskly down the avenue.

A heavy gale the night before had stripped the last leaves from the lime-trees, and strewn thickly on the road, where they crackled under foot in the frosty air, and the last rays of the setting sun touched the fronds of the dead bracken with tips of scarlet and

gold and orange. Now and then the startled call of a pheasant, or the distant report of a gun, rang out upon the keen, still air, but otherwise there was no sound.

All the little inhabitants of the park, feathered and furred, were crouched in hidden security, frightened into safe retreat by the invasion of shooters and beaters earlier in the day. Did they wonder what fever seized the horrid race of mankind, that after endless months of peace and quiet, they should suddenly descend upon the sylvan solitudes, disturb the silence with their shouts and laughter, and then pass on, leaving death and havoc in their trail; empty burrows and forsaken forms to mark their onslaught. Or does the instinct which prompts concealment also teach that death is to be expected should concealment not be sufficiently complete? Is "the survival of the fittest" accepted as a natural law among the denizens of the "game" world? Does Mrs. Rabbit say calmly, on noticing her offspring's vacant place, "He should have taken better care of himself. I have managed to survive five seasons!" or does she silently console herself with the thought that there will be all the more room for her next family? The question of overcrowding must be acute in Bunnyland!

The fresh air and exercise were gradually cooling Eleanor's indignation, and presently she gave a little laugh as she recalled the gist of her mother-in-law's

remarks. Mrs. Trevor was a privileged person, and must evidently not be taken too seriously, but even so, Eleanor felt that she had food for thought.

In truth, she had done a good deal of hard thinking lately, ever since the night on which her husband had spoken of his years of absence. She had been indulging in a course of introspection, a thing which was new to her, and which, it must be confessed, she found quite painfully absorbing. She was anxiously searching for the thing she had missed, for she knew she had missed something, but what it was she had been unable to discover. Over and over again she asked herself the same questions. Why had she never more than touched the outer fringe of the lives of those around her? Why had she allowed her sensibilities to become blunted by a mass of trifling duties and worries, which it seemed to her now could never have been of any real importance? Why had she lost in such a measure the power of enjoyment, which was now, happily, returning to her by leaps and bounds?

She told herself angrily that she must have been hardly alive! The broader issues of life had held no meaning for her. What was the reason? Was it something she had lost, or something she had never possessed? There was Mildred enjoying every moment of her life, keenly interested in everything and every one, from the scullery maid's young man to the

lame dog at the farm, appreciative of every form of beauty, of every note of music, every shade of colour in the autumn woods and fields. Why! looking back, she herself could hardly remember anything that had happened five years before! some more important events she could recall, but none of the little details, such as Mildred poured out to her for hours at a time. It seemed almost as if her mind had been a smooth, hard surface, which the passing hour had had no acid to engrave with the hundred little lines and dots that make a picture at the last. What was the power that made heart and mind receptive to Life's influence?

Mrs. Trevor's calm statement as to her motives in marrying had been abominable! — wicked! — but it was so ridiculous and so untrue that she felt she must laugh at it. It really was not worth worrying about. Why did people always talk about being in love? she wondered. Her ideas of being in love were not very clear, she had not read a great many novels, but at the back of her mind was a feeling that it was something to be deprecated, something slightly immodest, if the truth must be told. It was a condition that made people do very foolish and unsuitable things, and seemed to blind the judgment of the wisest.

But she was very, very fond of Henry; her life with him was something pleasanter than she had ever imagined; she had everything she wanted. They had so

far had no disagreement whatever, and she felt no doubt that he was equally contented. He was very easily contented! She could almost have wished that he made more demands upon her time and attention, there seemed so little that she could do for him.

He had come in from shooting in a most happy humour, laughing and talking far more than was usual with him, full of the enjoyment of the day, and boasting with evident pleasure that his hand had not lost its cunning after all these years. He had spoken more than once of his plans for improving the shooting next year, and had discussed details with Roger Bolding and Captain Maitland in the keenest way.

Mrs. Trevor was really rather a silly old thing! Of course Henry would do his share of the duties his ownership of the property entailed. Why should she suppose that because a man was literary, he should take no interest in the world outside? However, she had always heard that every one had to put up with something from their mother-in-law, and Mrs. Trevor was quite kind, and Minnie delightfully entertaining.

On her return homeward, she made a detour through a small coppice which lay on the outside of the park; she had often walked there before, and as the sportsmen had been through it in the morning, she knew it would be deserted now. The great beech-trees, stripped now of their burden of golden leaves, were

standing gaunt and ghostly in the nebulous atmosphere, as if waiting until the hand of Spring should restore them to life again. The wind had died down, and hardly a rustle broke the stillness; only once a frightened rabbit scudded across the path, as if ten thousand horrors raced at his heels, and dived into his hole at the foot of a great tree.

The path took a sharp twist, and as Eleanor turned the corner she saw, to her surprise, two figures walking towards her. The meeting was so unexpected in the solitude of the wood, that for a moment she stood still in surprise. Then, walking forward, she saw that they were two women, one elderly, and the other much younger, who leant on her companion, and seemed greatly fatigued. Eleanor suddenly remembered Captain Maitland's jest about the house of mystery, that house which lay shrouded in trees only about two hundred yards away, and felt sure that the elder of the two must be the Mrs. Mollison of whom he had spoken. She remembered also what she had heard about the disinclination of the inhabitants to see strangers, and was intending to walk rapidly past them, when she heard the younger woman say:

"I can't go any further, Nannie, I can't indeed! I am so dreadfully tired!"

"Come, come, my lamb!" was the reply, given him with a strong Scotch accent. "You'd not be the one to be complained; 'Tis only a wee while further."

At this moment, the girl, for she looked no more, swayed heavily, and would have fallen, but Eleanor stepped quickly to her, and said:

"You are very tired, I'm sure. Take my arm, and you will find it easier to walk."

A red flush spread painfully over the white face, and there was no reply, but Mrs. Mollison said civilly:

"Thank you, I think we can manage all right."

But Eleanor turned, still supporting the feeble figure, and the three walked on together.

"You have come further than you intended, I expect, but it is so lovely this afternoon, although now the sun has gone down, it is much colder. I am Lady Trevor, and I often come into this wood. It is so beautiful, isn't it?"

She was talking at random, for she was most anxious not to appear inquisitive.

"I fear we are trespassing, m' lady," said Mrs. Mollison, "but I heard the shooters go through this morning, and did not think we should meet any one now."

"Oh, no; I am glad you enjoy walking here. It is so nice and quiet."

In a few moments, Eleanor saw to her relief that they were approaching the end of the path, and that there was a small door in the boundary wall, for it was evident that the invalid's steps were growing feebler, and she leaned more heavily on the supporting arms.

Mrs. Mollison glanced at her once or twice, and then looked at Eleanor with a meaning she quite understood. She opened the door, and together they half supported, half carried the girl up the garden path and into the house. She motioned to a door on the left of the hall, and they entered, and laid her on a big sofa in front of a cheerful fire.

"I will go and get some wine, m' lady. I won't be a moment."

Eleanor removed the girl's hat and gloves, and chafed her hands, which were icy cold. The white face on the cushion was deathly in its pallor, and Eleanor felt greatly alarmed, for she was not without experience in illness, and could see that she was very ill indeed.

In a moment Mrs. Mollison came back, and presently the wine and the warmth restored a faint colour to the pale cheeks of the girl. She opened her eyes, and said, slowly:

"Thank you, you are very kind."

"You lie quietly a minute, dearie, and you'll be better," said Mrs. Mollison, tenderly: and wearily the blue eyes closed again.

Eleanor rose from her knees, for she had been kneeling beside the couch, and followed the Scotchwoman into the hall.

"She is very ill, I fear."

"Aye! she is ill, m' lady. We do all we can—"

The tears stood in the poor woman's eyes, and her voice faltered.

"I am quite sure you do," said Eleanor, kindly. "Can I help you in any way? I should be so glad to be of some use."

Mrs. Mollison opened her lips as if about to speak, then she evidently thought better of it, and was silent.

"Will you not let me help you?"

Eleanor had a beautiful voice, very gentle and low, and just now it was vibrant with sympathy. The woman turned suddenly, and held out a rough, toil-worn hand.

"M' lady," she said, quickly, "you'll forgive me, 'twas no mistrust. God knows she wants a friend — she has no friend but me that am but a rough woman, though none could love her more. Your face is kind. I have seen you once or twice, though you did not see me, and I felt your heart is kind. But I must tell you this — if you will be a friend to her as needs one sorely, you must ask no questions, and seek to know nothing but what she tells you. And I'm thinking that will no be much."

"I will ask no questions, and seek to know nothing," repeated Eleanor, quietly; "but I would like to be a friend if you will let me. May I come again?"

"Aye! Come, m' lady, though I'm no saying if she'll see you."

"I will come and try. Meanwhile, won't you let

me know if there is anything you want. Wine or fruit?"

"Thank you, m' lady," said the woman, rather proudly. "We take care that she wants for nothing of that."

"I will come again," said Eleanor.

As she retraced her steps along the woodland path, her heart ached with pity for the girl she had just left. She looked almost a child. What blow had Fate dealt her, that she should wear that look of grief?

She was determined to keep the letter of her promise; she would ask no questions, not seem to wish to know anything, if only she might do something, however little, to lighten the look of anguish in those sorrow-stricken eyes.

CHAPTER X

NEW INTERESTS

"We sleep, but the loom of life never stops; and the pattern which was weaving when the sun went down, is weaving when it comes up to-morrow." —HENRY WARD BEECHER.

"I HAVE had a very interesting letter from Phillips this evening," said Sir Henry, after dinner. "He quotes a certain Dr. Harper as a great authority on the subject of our correspondence. I have heard of him, of course. I wish there was a chance of my meeting him."

"Do you mean Dr. Harper, the 'Century' man?" asked Minnie.

"Yes; do you know him?"

"I have seen him. A dried-up old fossil with a moth-eaten beard. I have never spoken to him, shouldn't know what to say to him if I did! but a friend of mine married his equally fossilized son. I can introduce you to Mary Harper, if you like, and she can pass you on to her papa-in-law."

"I should like it extremely," said Sir Henry, quickly. "He is the man above all others I have wished to meet."

"Mary Harper is rather blue, herself. We were at

school together, and she was always top, and I was always bottom! She really is a little too clever for everyday use, but I like her. Some people are like that, aren't they? You must treat them like dictionaries, leave them on a shelf, and only take them down when you want them. They're too heavy, and get in the way when they're knocking about all the time! But I'll take Mary Harper off her shelf, and ask her to dinner to meet you, with pleasure. I suppose I must ask her fossil, too. When will you come?"

"I think any time will suit me. Eh! Eleanor?"

"Certainly," his wife replied quickly. "I don't think there is anything to prevent your going at any time."

"Well," said Minnie, "why not come back to London with us? What do you say, Mamma? We can put you up, and you can come and go as you like, and stay as long as you like."

"Thank you very much. I will come with pleasure."

"You don't mind being made love to, do you?" enquired Minnie, suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?" said Sir Henry, in surprise.

"You see, Violet Green will be staying with me, and she always makes love to any man she sees. She might practise on you, just to keep her hand in."

Minnie had a mischievous twinkle in her eye, and was evidently enjoying her brother's look of discomfiture. "What would you do, Henry," she continued, laughing, "if any one made love to you? I'd take it on myself if I wasn't your sister, just to see how you took it."

"I should dislike it intensely under any circumstances," he answered firmly.

"Oh, no! not if the woman was pretty enough," retorted Minnie; "but you needn't be too anxious. Violet is quite weirdly ugly, so ugly as to be quite attractive to some people. But you'll be bored with her."

"I shall be out a good deal."

Sir Henry spoke in a tone of satisfaction which made them all laugh. There was such obvious consolation in the thought.

"I shall cut his hair, and break his spectacles, and send him back at the end of a fortnight quite tame," whispered Minnie to Eleanor.

Eleanor laughed; she was getting used to Minnie.

"I do think he ought to see an oculist, but I am afraid he won't."

"Oh, yes, he will — if I have to drag him there by his hair, before it's cut! Come and play Bridge."

Presently Sir Henry came up to Eleanor, who was sitting by Mrs. Trevor, and said:

"I hope you don't mind my going to London, but

it really is a great opportunity, and I hardly like to miss it."

"Of course not! I am delighted that you should go. Mildred and Joan and I will amuse ourselves very well. Do go, and stay just as long as you like. By the way, do you think I could ask that young Lucas to come here? Joan is perpetually asking when her 'Jim' is coming, and I really think it would be a great pleasure to both the girls to see him. I don't want them to lose sight of their old friends."

"Ask him, by all means. He can have a day's hunting on the black horse, and there are plenty of rabbits, if he cares to shoot them. But I shall be back in time to see him, I expect. I wonder —" he hesitated — "if you would be so kind as to do something for me. I hardly like to trouble you, but the fact is, that I have some copy which must be written out again before I go, and it is rather more than I can manage single-handed. Would you very much mind —"

"Of course not!" said Eleanor, rising. "It would be a great pleasure. Show me what you want done." She glanced at Mrs. Trevor, who was reclining in an armchair, with a book still upright in her hands, but her eyes closed. "She won't miss me; she will doze until they have finished playing."

They entered the library, and Sir Henry produced the papers and gave his instructions.

"I am much relieved," he said. "I could only trust them to some one who would be careful and accurate."

Eleanor felt a little glow of pleasure. It was the first time he had given her any share in his work.

For an hour they sat, each at a separate table, and no further word was spoken, for Eleanor was glad to find that her work was quite simple, and that she had no need to ask questions, and Sir Henry was absorbed in what he was doing. Then she rose.

"I must go now," she said; "but it shall be finished in the morning."

She gathered up the papers. Sir Henry did not move, his head was bowed, his pen was moving rapidly, he was lost to everything except his occupation.

"Good-night," she said softly, and left the room.

She was so anxious not to disturb him in any way, in the hope that, should she prove to be an efficient amanuensis, her services might be employed again. How delightful it would be if he would allow her to assist him in his work, how many interests they might have in common; what a deep interest would be added to her life. It is to be doubted if Sir Henry even noticed her departure, for he possessed a remarkable power of concentration, and once his whole attention was given to the work in hand, he had no thought beyond it.

The game was just over when Eleanor entered the

drawing-room, and Mrs. Trevor had awaked with a start.

"Have you had a nice sleep, Mamma?" enquired Minnie.

"I have only been thinking," returned her mother. "I shut my eyes because the light makes them ache. I should not think of sleeping after dinner. It is a bad habit, and ruins the digestion."

Mrs. Trevor was one of the many who would sooner die than acknowledge to a nap, although the process of thought seemed of necessity accompanied by the low music of gentle snores.

"I must thank you for a very pleasant visit, Lady Trevor," said Roger Bolding. "It has been delightful. We have had some excellent sport. I think your husband has enjoyed it, too."

"Yes, I am sure he has. At first, you know, he is rather inclined to avoid anything that what he calls 'wastes his time,' but I am sure it has done him a great deal of good."

"He told me to-day, as we walked home, that he hadn't enjoyed anything so much for years. He got most awfully keen about it. I wish you had been out."

"So do I. I must try and come out next time."

The guests had all departed with Sir Henry, when Eleanor broached the subject of Jim Lucas's visit to

the girls. Joan received it with wild screams of delight, which so excited Alphonse Daudet that he was seized with a fit of "mental abrasion," and the child and the dog tore round and round the hall, until Eleanor and Mildred begged for mercy.

"Jim is coming! Jim is coming!" cried Joan. "May I go to the station to meet him, and drive all myself?"

"My dear, I haven't written to ask him yet. Perhaps he won't come."

"Oh, yes, he'll come! I know he will. He said he'd come to Zululand to see me if I went there, only he wouldn't promise to wear nothing but beads and grease. He'll come! I know he will. I do hope he'll come before Mr. Roberts goes."

"Who is Mr. Roberts?"

"Mr. Roberts is Dobbs's uncle. He's a great philanthropist, and told all about me by the bumps on my head."

"Phrenologist!" whispered Mildred. Joan always used the longest words, and hated to be corrected. "Have you been sitting in the harness room with Dobbs and the philanthropist?"

"Yes. He was most polite. He said I was fond of music, and might be led, but wouldn't be driven. Dobbs said that was like the garden donkey, which wasn't very polite of Dobbs. But I know Jim would get on very well with Mr. Roberts; he plays the cornet."

"Who, Jim?" asked Eleanor.

"No, Mr. Roberts. He was in the 'Better Land' when the bell rang, and I had to leave him. Aunt Eleanor! do let him tell your bumps!"

"No, thank you!" she returned, laughing. "I would rather not."

"He really is a very interesting man. He told me a great many things about myself that I didn't know before. He has been in America, and fought with the Indians. He is a doctor, too. Dobbs says there is nothing he can't cure. He told me there wasn't any reason why people shouldn't live till they were a hundred and fifty, if they would do as he told them."

"How is he going to make them do that?"

"Well, he didn't tell me exactly, there wasn't time. But they had to drink some stuff he had got in a bottle, and not worry. He said worry was what made men food for worms."

"How very nasty!" said Mildred.

"He isn't at all nasty," replied Joan, with dignity. "He can speak seven tongues, and is most interesting. I know Jim will love him. When are you going to write to Jim?"

"I will go and do it now," said Eleanor.

"Then I'll come and write too. Just to tell him to come at once. I know he'll come."

Events proved that Joan was quite right, for Jim replied that he would come with pleasure.

On the afternoon on which he was expected, the girls drove to meet him, and Eleanor, being left to her own devices, walked down to the village.

She had already paid one visit to the House of Mystery, or, to give it its proper title, 'Rooks' Nest.' Mrs. Mollison had received her a little stiffly, as if she repented of her confidence, but Eleanor was determined not to be put off by any coldness of manner, and had been so pleasant and friendly, that finally the woman had asked her to step inside. The invalid had been lying on the sofa, looking very frail, but a little better than on the previous occasion. She was very shy and silent, but did not seem averse to Eleanor's company. The room was bare and sparsely furnished, but a bright fire and a bunch of flowers gave a touch of cheerfulness to the scene. A small table beside the couch was strewn with books.

Eleanor had found it uphill work making conversation, and had finally resorted to reading aloud, which the invalid had seemed to enjoy. She confessed to a love of poetry; in fact, nearly all the volumes in the room were poetical works, a varied assortment from Shakespeare to Swinburne and Keats to Kipling. She had read for an hour, and had then taken her leave, without having exchanged more than a few words with the girl.

To-day, Eleanor had armed herself with Adam Lindsay Gordon and a bunch of violets. Mrs. Mollison was much more genial.

"She liked your visit, m' lady; she seemed quite bright afterwards," she said, as Eleanor entered.

The girl was lying in the same position as before, but there was more animation and colour in the face that turned to greet her visitor. She accepted the violets shyly, and on hearing of the book that Eleanor had brought, said she knew it, and asked her to read "The Sick Stockrider." Eleanor did so, reading slowly and quietly.

"I've had my share of pastime, and I've had my share of toil,
And life is short, the longest life a span,
I care not now to linger for the corn or for the oil
Or for wine that maketh glad the heart of man.
For deeds undone, or gifts mis-spent, or resolutions vain,
'Tis somewhat late to trouble. This I know,
I should live the same life over if I had to live again—"

The girl on the sofa spoke suddenly, as if half to herself.

"Ah! That is it! One would live the same life over if one had to live again. It is too late to trouble now, and whatever happens, we have lived."

Eleanor was struck by the passionate tone in which she spoke.

"The question is, ought one to regret?" continued the girl, wistfully. "I can't regret."

"Why should you?" said Eleanor, stoutly.

She was absolutely ignorant of the past, but one thing was certain, you had only to look into the

great blue eyes, to know that whatever that past had been, it had held no shame. Sorrow, yes, in full measure, but shame, no.

"And some day," the girl went on dreamily, "everything will be put right; I don't know how, because it seems impossible to put some things right."

"Perhaps," suggested Eleanor, "we shall be altered ourselves, and shall not want the same things. Our idea of happiness may be different. Who can tell? But everything will be put right."

"Yes! I believe that. What should I do if I didn't believe that? But there is so much that one does not understand."

"It is not wise to seek to understand too much."

"Ah! but we are not all wise!" was the quick reply, and a faint smile crossed the white face. "And we have to pay the price whether we are wise or foolish. And some of us are bankrupt! We pay all we possess, and that is not enough."

"It must be enough, since we can pay no more."

There was no reply, and after a while Eleanor continued reading. When she had finished, there was a long silence, and she glanced at the occupant of the sofa, thinking that perhaps she had fallen asleep. But no, the blue eyes were wide open, and one hand was idly pushing a ring up and down her finger. It was a wedding ring. Eleanor had noticed it on the

first day, and had noticed, too, how much too loose it was for the thin hand. She had thought of her new acquaintance as a girl, but she wore the badge of womanhood. Of what tragedy was it the outward sign?

"The past seems very long ago when the future is so short," — her thoughts seemed to be uttered unconsciously.

"Don't say that," said Eleanor, quickly. "The future may have brightness in store for you. Do not trouble about it."

"I do not trouble, but I know — and I am glad. It is very peaceful here. I have no trouble — now. The sun set for me a very long time ago, and now the last rays are gently fading over the hills. Those hills that were such weary work to climb."

"The dawn will be bright," said Eleanor, gently.

It seemed useless to urge the hope of living on one whose journey was so clearly nearly over. If she knew it herself, there was no need of pretence; that pitiful pretence which watchers by a sick bed keep up with breaking heart, while all the time it deceives no one! The approach of death brings very clear vision, as a rule.

"Will you call me Constance?" the girl said suddenly. "It is my name, although I have not heard it for a long time. You are so kind. I have always been afraid to meet people, but perhaps I was wrong. There was no reason why I should have been afraid!"

"I am proud to be your friend," said Eleanor.

Just then Mrs. Mollison came in, and Eleanor rose to go.

"You will come again soon?" said Constance, wistfully.

"I will come again very soon," she replied, as she stooped and kissed her.

In the hall she turned to Mrs. Mollison, and said:

"Forgive me, but has a doctor seen her? Can nothing be done?"

"Her own doctor, that has known her from a child, comes from London once a month, m' lady, and will come oftener if we send for him. But there is nothing to be done. And what is there to keep her?" added the woman, fiercely. "What is her life now?"

She closed her lips with a snap, as if fearful that she might say more than she intended. Then she opened the door, and Eleanor passed through without a word.

After this, it became Eleanor's habit to go nearly every afternoon to 'Rooks' Nest,' generally as the evening was closing in, just when the shadows fall, and thoughts creep out of the corners where they have been hidden during the daylight hours. She guessed, and rightly, that this was the time that Constance needed companionship most of all; and during the ensuing months, a real friendship grew up between them. There was such a pathetic strength in

the girl's attitude, no fear, no sorrow, just patience. Not idle, empty patience, but the strong patience of one who had fought and lived, and gloried in the living, of one who has failed because the foe was too strong, but who, nevertheless, is conscious of having fought well. She opened her thoughts to Eleanor quite freely as time went on, and they were so poetic, so deep, and at the same time so true, that Eleanor was lost in wonder at the beauty and vigour of the intelligence which soared above the trammels of the wasted frame. The hours spent at 'Rooks' Nest' were, for Eleanor, some of the most happy and most fruitful of her life.

CHAPTER XI

A KNOCKING AT THE DOOR

"Is this a dream? O, if it be a dream,
Let me sleep on, and do not wake me yet!"

—LONGFELLOW.

IT was all very puzzling! Eleanor's brows were drawn together in a little pucker, and her eyes had lost their calm serenity. She stood on the stone steps, feeding the pigeons from a basket of corn, mechanically flinging handful after handful where it was most needed, without conscious volition.

It was one of those days which are especially sent to be the solace of those intrepid ones who are bold enough to brave the varied rigours of an English winter. As a reward for valour, the fates bestow just once, in a season of alternating muggy mildness and freezing fogginess, a day on which it is a treat to be alive—a day which for sheer beauty and caresses can hardly be equalled, and certainly not surpassed, in any corner of the civilized globe.

The sun shone kindly, shielded with just sufficient vapour to give it a touch of uncertainty, like a lady whose charms are enhanced by a gossamer veil, which betrays rather than conceals her loveliness.

The sky was all shades of blue, from deepest cobalt to faintest azure, broken here and there by fleecy clouds which scudded on unfelt airs, from the heavier masses on the horizon, like sheep breaking from the flock on entering pasture.

It was hard to believe that spring was not at hand, that the horse-chestnut on the lawn would not open sticky buds to greet the festal atmosphere. But nothing could have been more lovely than the outline of every tree-top, in its myriad branches and twigs, against the blue of the sky. The great stone pine was cut like a silhouette against the ether, while on the old wall below it, a peacock was pruning his feathers, and spreading his tail, which flashed and glittered in the sunlight. In the intervals of his toilet he was watching the pigeons at their morning meal, with an aristocratic and haughty air, which held at the same time a tinge of envy. Kings may thus envy mortals their freedom from dignity's shackles, and it was beneath him to scramble for succulent morsels with the vulgar herd. Or perhaps he had breakfasted.

Sir Henry had been gone for three weeks, during which time Eleanor had, as she confessed in her letters to Miss Price, "been ridiculously young!" It was impossible to be otherwise with Jim Lucas about, for where Jim happened to be, there were youth, high spirits, and overflowing gaiety. They had

bicycled, they had driven, they had walked, and for one short week they had skated, and all the time, to use Joan's words, they had "Talked, and Talked, and Talked." Airy, inconsequent nonsense which it did the heart good to hear. Joan had, of course, had her lessons in the mornings, so Eleanor, Mildred, and Jim, and very frequently Roger Bolding, had amused themselves and each other.

At the end of the first week, Eleanor had declared that she could and would waste no more time; but the next week had passed, and the next, without any perceptible change in the order of each day's doings. Jim said, "They were so fearfully busy doing nothing!"

Sir Henry had written regularly. He was enjoying his visit to London. Dr. Harper had proved even more interesting than he had expected. They were busy hunting up some references at the British Museum, and he would return when his researches were completed. But so far no date had been fixed, or even suggested.

Captain Maitland had joined their party on several occasions. He was enormously taken with Jim.

"He is a delightful boy," he said warmly. "So full of life and vigour that I can hardly take my eyes off him. To hear him at that piano is quite delightful. I laughed until I was tired, the other

evening, and found myself chuckling all the way home."

And Eleanor had admitted that she had laughed more since his arrival than during the whole previous course of her life.

"He is the personification of gaiety," Captain Maitland continued. "It is easy to see that Life has never troubled him for a moment."

"I hope it never will."

"No! For haven't you noticed that those people who so thoroughly appreciate joy, appreciate sorrow just as keenly? However, I don't know why we should talk of sorrow in connection with Jim; certainly there seems no shadow of a cloud on his horizon. They are two dear children, and I pray they may have all the joy they shed on others." Then, noticing that Eleanor looked surprised, he added, "Am I a gossiping old busybody? I am so sorry! but really you must have noticed how fond he is of her, and it seems to me that she entirely returns the feeling."

"It had not struck me. Joan always seems to claim most of his attention; Mildred is generally rather silent. I have noticed it particularly since Jim came."

"A bad sign! A bad sign!" said the old man, laughing. "They are both fine natures, they will love finely. You couldn't have expected to keep

her very long, you know, Lady Trevor. Youth and love are inseparable. Youth is love, and love is youth, the fountain of eternal Youth, the leaven in the lump of life, 'The only thing worth having.'"

Eleanor had made no reply; and presently their conversation had drifted into other channels.

What was this mysterious power? It seemed to surround her on every side. There were Jim and Mildred stepping hand in hand into its radiant circle. There was Captain Maitland, full of years and common sense, stating decidedly and thoughtfully that it was the only thing worth having!

She had become devoted to Mildred, and since her conversation with Captain Maitland, had watched her with different eyes; and she was forced to confess that a change had come over the girl. Her smile had an added beauty, her voice an added sweetness, while her eyes were dim as with some vision of transcendent loveliness which was dawning before her.

Eleanor felt as if life, which had seemed so simple, had suddenly developed all the complexity of a Chinese puzzle. The more she tried to solve it, the more she missed the clue, and had to begin all over again. She emptied her basket, and, turning, went indoors with a vague pain at her heart.

Later that day, she walked into the village shop. It was empty, save for old Lavender, who was busily

weighing tea, and tying it into half-pound packets, singing cheerily to herself the while. She had sung in the village choir for many years, before the era of surpliced boys, and now, though her voice was thin and reedy, here and there an unexpectedly sweet note would surprise the listener. Probably the practices of long ago had fixed words and tunes in her memory, for she always sang hymns, and they were always cheerful.

"Count your bless — ings. Count — them — one by one.
Count — your blessings. See what — God — hath done."

The words and tune came uncertainly and jerkily, sometimes they ceased altogether for a moment, when the scales required a particularly nice adjustment, but after the pause they were resumed as if there had been no interruption.

"Good-afternoon, Lavender! How are you?" said Eleanor.

"I'm fine, m' lady. How's yourself this day?"

"I'm very well, thank you."

"You've not got Sir Henry back yet?"

"No, not yet, he is still busy in London."

"Ah! London! That do seem a wonderful place," said the old woman, nodding her head. "I never was there but once, and then I was fairly put about! 'Twas years ago, and I'd an aunt lived there. Some 'Gardens,' I don't rightly remember the name.

Well, I went up one day with a square of honey, and a fine plant of rosemary for to put in her 'gardens.' I was thinking, maybe, they'd be something the same as them up to yours, m' lady, for uncle, he was a warm man, they said. And when I got there, I laughed!"

"What happened?" asked Eleanor.

"Well! I got into a big yaller carriage, a 'bus it was, with a fat man sitting under a great umbrella, and a young man on the back step, very pale he was, I remember, but I thought perhaps it were standing in all that rocking and shaking. Then, all of a sudden we stop, and he says, 'Here, ma'am, here's your gardens.' He had me run on to the pavement in no time, and I looked all round for them gardens, but I couldn't see them. Then I said to a policeman, 'Please tell me where these gardens is,' and he says, 'This is it.' And I fairly burst out laughing. There was a sycamore and two poplars standing bare and black ('twas not a leaf time, being February, if I mind me right), and there was seven or eight measly bushes, a coal scuttle and tomater tin! I stood and laughed, and laughed. There was my plant of rosemary in my arms, and there was the 'Gardens,' looking worse than old Tinker's yard" (the Marine Store dealer). "His trees don't do well. Trees don't seem to favour the iron scraps, I've noticed.

"I'd heard a wonderful lot about London bein' so gay and bright, and full of pleasure, but it seemed to

me that the pleasure was like the bubbles in the ginger-beer, soon bursted and gone. And London folks was, to me, kind of unfeeling. There was aunt took ill sudden, and there was nobody come in from next door, friendly like, to help her. She said she didn't know her next-door neighbour! London people don't seem to have no more heart than April lettuce. But maybe I was wrong, and 'twas well hidden."

"I don't know London well, but I don't think I should like to live there."

"So you see it's a mercy we don't neither of us have to!" said old Lavender, cheerfully. "There's mercies in everything."

"I came to ask about your daughter. I heard she wasn't well."

"She has been wonderful poorly, m' lady. I went to see her last Monday, and she was sadly. But I had a letter from her, and she says she's mending now. Poor soul! the life's hard for her when she's ailing."

"Are they still moving about?" asked Eleanor.

"They aren't often more than two days in one place. Always on the move! I never could abide it! Waking up in the morning and not knowing what you were going to see! If I couldn't look out and see the bakehouse chimney standing where it always stands, I don't know what I should do! That I don't! That caravan, that do seem stuffy too, for

if the door's open, 'tis freezing cold, and the boy isn't over strong. But she's happy, Bessie is — wonderful happy! So long as her man keeps on the square, she don't mind."

"It must be a very different life to being here with you. I wonder she could go away to that."

"She found her man," replied Lavender. "I tried all I knew to reason with her at first, and then I stopped, for I knew 'twas no manner of use fighting it. For where your love calls, there you must go, be it near or far — and then 'tis Heaven or Hell, according to the man."

She spoke quite simply. She was stating the truth as she knew it, with the outspoken courage with which the strong hearts of her class meet Life. They know no evasion, no subtlety; the thing is there, and they accept it. The eternal law of mating as primeval nature mated, but with the complexity and frailty of human souls added to it, so that the outcome was not to be foretold.

A sense of the tragedy underlying the words struck Eleanor like a blow. On the top of her heart-searchings and questionings, this calm acknowledgment of a force against which it was futile to struggle, a force which, relentless and overwhelming, pushed aside the mother-love and home-love as if they were of no account, was almost more than she could bear. It may be that her face betrayed her

feelings, for almost immediately Lavender continued with a smile: —

"But there! 'tisn't every one has the power to feel like that. 'Tis not given to every one, to be sure! Some go and marry for nothing more than a roof, or a Sunday frock. With Jennie Miller 'twas a matter of a cow and a chiny teapot! A nice teapot it was, and Ned Miller's mother and grandmother had set wonderful store by it. They used to say it had come from a foreign land, and certainly there was not another like it in the village. His mother was always a-talking of it, saying as how her son's wife would have something no one else had; and Jennie, she was young and foolish, and when Ned asked her, she said 'Yes,' just to have the laugh over the other maids, and not caring a snap about him. And what happened? She was feckless and untidy, and Ned grew surly, — and small wonder, with a home like a pigsty; and one day Jennie goes cleaning, in a temper, just to show she could if she chose, and the handle of the besom knocked the chiny teapot off the shelf, and broke it all to bits. The cow died soon after, with eating a bit of the old yew-tree; and there was the end of it! He'd got a wife as weren't no manner of use to him, and she'd got a man with a temper, and no cow and no teapot!

"No! No! that don't do, to go and choose a husband like you would a pair of boots. Not but

what they're much alike," — Lavender nodded her head wisely, " for if they don't fit you, they'll hurt you horrid ! "

Eleanor made no reply, and after a pause, Lavender said : —

" You never can tell about marriage, can you, m' lady ? Seems full of surprises, it does. And folks are different. Some takes things earnest, and some takes things light, and folks that takes things light have an easier time, maybe — but then, again, maybe they miss the best ! "

At this point in the conversation a customer entered, and Eleanor took her leave.

It seemed almost as if circumstances had combined to force the same topic on her attention from every quarter. She did not seem able to get away from it. Wherever she went it haunted her. She found herself wishing her husband would return. When her life resumed its usual routine, her time would be filled in, and she would be able to shake off these problems and fancies which had taken possession of her. She had had too much frivolity and idleness ; she must start hard work of some kind, that would restore control over her mind, and help her to forget what she called her foolish thoughts.

Eleanor felt happier when she had arrived at this decision, but nevertheless, after she went to bed that night, she lay awake for hours. And when at last

sleep came to her, it was not the quiet slumber to which she was accustomed, for, contrary to her usual habit, she dreamed.

It seemed to her that she walked in a quiet garden of lawns and trees; it was very silent and very peaceful. She noticed with surprise, however, that there were no flowers, nothing but foliage and verdure. Presently, as she walked along, she came to a door, through the bars of which she could see glimpses of another garden, which was full of flowers in full bloom and beauty. There were lilies, and there were roses, masses of them, more than she had ever seen in her life before, and the scent of their fragrance reached her through the barred door. She raised her hand to try the latch, and as she did so, she noticed she was carrying an old china teapot! It seemed absurd, even in her dream, that she should be walking in a garden carrying a teapot!

She found she could not open the door, so again she waited, although she did not know what for; but presently she saw a figure coming towards her. It was curiously indistinct; it seemed to be wrapped in a mist, and something told her it was the mist of years. The figure was veiled, and she could see no face; but again something told her its name was Love.

And Love opened the gate, just a little, and beckoned with his hand. She longed to enter the garden, but she knew she must not do so until she had seen

his face, and she could not see it through the veil. So she turned and walked away, feeling faint with longing for the beauty of the garden; and when she awoke, she found the pillow was wet with her tears. The dream was so vivid, so real, that the longing did not vanish with the daylight as most dream longings do, but remained with her; and the next night, and many nights after, she dreamed the same dream.

She grew quite excited about it at last, and each night she wondered if the figure would unveil and show his face. But no, it remained veiled. The only difference was, that each night the door was opened just a little wider, and the scent of the roses and lilies grew stronger, and more fragrant.

CHAPTER XII

A NEW POINT OF VIEW

"Love, Love, what wilt thou with this heart of mine?
Nought see I fixed or sure in thee!
I do not know thee — nor what deeds are thine,
Love, Love, what wilt thou with this heart of mine?"
— LONGFELLOW.

"WELL!" said Minnie, cheerfully, "one thing is certain, and that is, that Eleanor has every reason to be enormously grateful to me! There isn't another woman who could have done what I've done for Henry, in this short space of time."

"He really is a different man," replied her mother, with an admiring sniff. "You really have managed him wonderfully. Why! last night, at Lady Seaton's, General Laurence asked me who that distinguished-looking man was."

"All me!" said Minnie, regardless of grammar, dropping a curtsy to herself in the looking-glass. "Of all the hairy, hungry-looking men I ever saw, Henry was the worst. Toby said I deserved a putty medal for walking down Bond Street with him. He didn't look so bad at Trevor, but London, *c'est autre chose!* I did it, and alone I did it! I nearly had hysterics at his face when I stopped at Douglas's, and

said, 'Now go and have all your hair cut off, and half your moustache!' But he went in like a lamb!"

"I am sure Eleanor ought to be very grateful to you," murmured Mrs. Trevor.

"She won't be," said Minnie, sweetly. "She will only be rather shocked at my daring to dictate to him."

"But the spectacles are gone!"

"Yes! You know the man said that he must still wear them in the bright sunshine, and that if he went about in a hot climate and a glare he'd probably go blind. But that's nothing, because no one can accuse poor old England of being too sunny, and now that he has got the place, and all, he won't want to go abroad again."

Minnie was silent for half a minute, and then she rattled on again in her extravagant way.

"I am thinking of putting an advertisement in the papers, 'Gentlemen trimmed and polished until fit to shine in any society.' It sounds rather like furniture polish, but I'm sure it would pay."

Mrs. Trevor sniffed a sniff of amusement, and smiled.

"I'm going out now," said Minnie, rising. "I'm lunching at Prince's with old Brandt."

"I can't think how you can speak to that horrible man," said Mrs. Trevor, venturing for once to disagree with her daughter.

"My dear Mamma, he is useful! I don't know what I should do without him. He's frightfully sharp, and knows everything simply weeks before any one else. I've made a pot of money this year by following his tips."

"He's so hideous," said the old lady, feebly.

"He isn't a beauty, certainly, but I can eat a very good lunch without looking at him. An oyster is nastier to look at, but that doesn't prevent my eating them!"

"Shall you be in to dinner?"

"No. I'm dining with Toby, and going to the play, but I shall see you at tea time. Ta-ta, old lady, I must run. I've got to try on two gowns at Celeste's before luncheon."

Meanwhile, Sir Henry was seated in the train which was bearing him rapidly homeward. He was leaning back comfortably, smoking a cigar, and reading a magazine. His visit to London had been a great success. He had met the right men, he had acquired the information he needed, and in the bag which lay beside him on the seat were a mass of papers and notes which would occupy him for many months to come. Oh, yes, he was very glad he had been to London; ten minutes' conversation with a person was far more satisfactory than any amount of correspondence.

He was on the right track now, that he knew. Very soon he would have a foothold, and then he

could climb. The difficulty was to get a start, after so many wasted years. Eleanor had really been very good. From what he heard, some men's wives were most tiresome about letting their husbands go away, and were always making demands upon their time, but he felt he had every reason to be thankful that Eleanor was not like that; she was most sensible about his work.

Then his thoughts soared off to the distant mountains of attainment whose summit he would soon reach. His mind seethed with ideas and inspirations. He felt that the last few weeks of intercourse with some of the great minds of the day had been, as it were, the friction necessary to cause the smouldering to burst embers of his thought into spark and flame. He was keenly looking forward to reaching home and starting work again.

On the whole, Minnie had vastly amused him. He was too good-natured, perhaps too easy-going, to mind her comments on his appearance and her high-handed way of improving the same. Perhaps body as well as brain had become rusty during his sojourn abroad. He was perfectly willing to wear short hair and new clothes, if it pleased her; it did not make any difference to him. He was equally willing to accompany her into society whenever it did not interfere with his numerous appointments, and to tell the truth, he had been surprised to find how much

he had enjoyed himself. But now — to work! — to work! — that was his one idea.

It was snowing and intensely cold when he reached Larnham and stepped into the brougham for his homeward drive, but he hardly noticed the weather; he was busy arranging his schemes for the future. Occasionally he would take out his pencil, and jot down a few words on a slip of paper by the dim light of the carriage lamps, but for the most part he sat motionless and thoughtful.

Eleanor and the girls were sitting by the hall fire when he arrived, and Joan flew to meet him.

"How are you all?" he said cheerfully. "What a cold night!"

"You must have had a most disagreeable journey," said Eleanor. "I expect you are half frozen."

"Oh, no! How cheerful and comfortable you look!"

"Jim has gone," said Joan, mournfully. "He couldn't stay, but he says he will come back again."

"I am very sorry not to see him. But really, Eleanor, I was so busy. There were so many things to keep me, I really could not get away before."

"You will see the great Jim soon," said Eleanor, smiling. "He assured us he would come back before long. How did you leave your mother and Minnie?"

"Very well, I think. Minnie is a most energetic person, never still for a moment, so far as I could see.

It is very nice to be back home," he added. "I seem to have been away a long time."

"Lots of things have happened," said Joan. "Jenkins is dead, and the stable dog has got six puppies."

"Jenkins was one of the under gardeners," explained Mildred.

"How are you, Eleanor?" asked Sir Henry, suddenly looking at his wife.

"I —" she stammered, "I am very well."

To her annoyance a flush suffused her face from throat to temples as she met his eyes. She was asking herself in bewilderment what had happened to her husband? He was extraordinarily changed. It was not only the alteration in his appearance, but the whole man was different. There seemed to be a keenness and an energy about him which had been absent before.

And then she realized that of course his eyes had been hidden before by his glasses, and now his direct glance embarrassed her; for some reason which she could not understand, she could not meet it. She was furious with herself for blushing like a girl, and grateful to Joan for chattering. It gave her time to recover herself. But presently the girls went away, and Sir Henry rose, and Eleanor spoke. She felt she must say something to put an end to her awkwardness.

"You have had a successful time in London?"

"Yes!" he answered warmly. "Splendid! It was most interesting. Harper was a delightful man, and introduced me to a lot of people I wanted to know. I am to write a series of articles for the 'Forum.'"

"I am so glad," she said.

"It is a good beginning. The great thing is to get in. I felt so hopelessly out of it before; but now I am ready and anxious to get to work again. I met several publishers, too, and Jackson of the 'Courier.' You see, some of the things I sent home have kept a place warm for me, in a way, so that they know pretty well what my subjects are. I must write to Kohler to-morrow, and tell him all about it. I found out one or two things he wanted to know, too. If I get regularly on to the 'Century,' it will be a great thing. Oh! I can do it all right now."

Eleanor looked at him. He was standing in front of the fire, his head thrown back, his eyes bright and eager, his whole figure instinct with self-confidence and determination. And as if in answer to her thought, he said suddenly: —

"It is not every one, you know, that has a second chance. But my chance has come to me, and I am going to take it. I am going straight on now." And then he added rather grimly, "Nothing shall turn me from the path this time."

When Eleanor went up to her room that night, she walked to the window, flung it wide open, and, wrapping herself in a fur cloak, she sat down beside it.

The moon was shining brightly, shedding its beams over the snow that lay like a pall over the sleeping earth. There was no wind, and the snow had ceased to fall; all nature seemed in thrall by the iron hand of Winter. The branches of the cedar on the lawn at the front of the house were weighed down beneath the weight of their burden, which gleamed and scintillated in the cold light, like thousands of tiny diamonds. And under that snowy pall lay life — slumbering in the certain hope of a glorious resurrection.

She pressed her hands to her temples, which were throbbing painfully with the excitement of her brain.

"Were hearts like that?" she wondered. "Did hearts sleep through the slow-moving years without sign of life, until they were quickened by the mysterious power which she was beginning, in a vague way, to acknowledge? Had her heart slept? And was it waking now? What was the reason of this quickening of her pulse, of this emotion of her senses, at the sight of those eyes whose look rent the veil of memory in a moment?" And again, as on another night many months before, she rose and crossed the room, and took the old photograph in her hand. She studied it long

and earnestly, and again the slow and painful colour suffused her face.

Then, for a moment, a sense of terror seized her like the strong grip of an unseen hand. What was this power, the force of whose might sounded distantly, but distinctly, in her ears, like the thunder of a far-off sea? Was the first wave of its overwhelming tide breaking even now in ripples at her feet? Was there no escape, no avoiding of the advancing flood? She was happy, she was content, and she feared the unknown. Might it not pass her by? And then, as if in immediate answer to her thought, a form stood out clearly before her eyes — so clearly that it seemed she had but to stretch out her hand to touch it — and a voice said again, "My chance has come, and I am going to take it." His chance of what? Of life? — or fame? — or something more?

It is curious that we are seldom afraid of anything we know. The familiar thing, however dangerous, always loses its terror; but the strongest men have been driven to panic by a thing they could not understand — a thing that seemed to them unaccountable — supernatural.

Eleanor was no weakling. She instinctively resented at first the thought of resigning herself to the control of a strange influence. She had walked through life as a path which had run between certain well-defined lines, a lane, as it were, with hedges and

trees on either side; but now it was leading her she knew not whither, on to a great plain where there were no signposts, and no familiar landmarks — a strange country!

But gradually the quiet beauty of the night had a soothing effect on her. The vast beauty of nature, which brings home to us the futility of our petty struggles against her inevitable laws, and strengthens us with a measure of her unchanging strength!

"After all," she thought, "whatever came to her, there was no reason to be afraid. She was here, in her proper place, in her home, and because a change took place in herself and her own feelings, it would not really affect her life. It would not alter the daily routine of duties and pleasures which made up the sum of her days, or influence her new capabilities of enjoyment, her new *joie de vivre*."

She sat on, regardless of the passing hours, and her thoughts were pleasant. They were more of the past than the future, for now that the veil was rent she found she could recall so much. Recollections that had been dim before stood out clear and bright, fraught with new meaning. Scenes from the life of "Sweet Nell" of long ago held for her now a precious personality. Words that had been spoken once, and then forgotten, returned to her now alive with new and sacred meaning, as a seed hidden under the brown earth awakes at the caress of the sun.

When she sought her bed at last, sleep came at once, and again she dreamed her dream. Again she saw the garden with its wealth of flowers, — Lilies of Love's purity — Roses of Love's delight. The air was clear and fragrant, for the mists of years had rolled away. The door stood wide open. The waiting figure was no longer veiled, and the face was the face of her husband.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SPIRIT OF THE SPRING

"The holy spirit of the Spring
Is working silently."

—GEORGE MACDONALD.

THE winter had come and gone, and Spring had touched the world with her magic wand, clothing bare fields and naked boughs with leaf and blossom at her bidding. The air was full of her elusive perfume. The horse-chestnut raised a thousand torches to a cloudless sky, the guelder roses danced in the gentle breeze, swaying and curtsying as if to some measure, the rhythm of which was audible to themselves alone. The rooks in the elms were volubly discussing their affairs, arguing the best method of rearing a new generation, and apparently finding some difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory decision. Mothers are the same, it is presumable, in every community; the younger ones would start their nursery with new theories which the older ones would consider ridiculous, and have no hesitation in condemning. Also, the mothers-in-law would feel it their duty to express their opinion! All this naturally leads to a good deal of conversation!

In a wicker chair under the great tree on the lawn

at 'Trevor Lordship' sat Miss Price, her mushroom hat tied firmly under her chin, her stoutly shod feet planted sturdily in front of her, and her hands clasped on her stick. She was sitting bolt upright, in a still and uncompromising attitude, but round her mouth hovered a little crooked smile, full of tenderness.

Circumstances had postponed her first visit to Eleanor's home until now, but the regular correspondence between them had kept her in touch with her daily life, and by dint of reading between the lines she had learnt a good deal more than had been told in black and white. At this moment she was engaged in what she herself termed "summing up the situation."

She had very soon come to the conclusion that Eleanor Russell loved her husband; that her feeling for him was very different since her marriage. For this new affection showed itself in a hundred little ways. On these occasions it is proverbial that onlookers see most of the game, and Miss Price found a certain pathos in Eleanor's attentions to her husband. They were so absolutely wasted.

Sir Henry was not the man to notice that the flowers on his writing-table were always freshly arranged, that his blotting-paper and pens were always exactly to his liking, and that his wife was ever on guard to defend his working hours from the slightest disturbance. He took all these things for granted.

Eleanor had told her friend quite frankly that she was perfectly and entirely happy, that she had no wish ungratified. This was all very pleasant as far as it went; but in Miss Price's opinion it did not go far, and did not, so far as she could see, ensure any lengthened duration of that state of content.

"Some men are fools! — fools!" she said angrily at last, beating the turf viciously with her stick, more to emphasize her words. Perhaps some of her irritation was caused by the fact that she couldn't make up her own mind as to what she wished for Eleanor. Would it be happier for her to continue in her present state of blindness, or to arrive speedily at a full knowledge of the situation? Which situation showed signs of becoming complicated! The old lady frowned, and rose from her chair, as Eleanor and Roger Bolding came out of the house together, and walked down the steps on to the lawn.

"All men are fools!" she muttered, changing her previous sentence by just one word.

"Have you seen Henry?" asked Eleanor. "Mr. Bolding has come over to ask him about that French fencing, and he generally comes in from his walk about this time."

"No," said Miss Price. "I have seen no one except Jim and Mildred, who were putting on the lawn a little while ago."

"Isn't this a heavenly day?" said Bolding, sinking

into a chair; "even Trevor couldn't spend it all indoors."

"He was writing most of the morning," said Eleanor, with a smile.

At this moment, Joan raced across the lawn, closely pursued by Jim, while Mildred followed at a more sedate pace.

"Lady Trevor," said Jim, plaintively, "have you a muzzle anywhere you could lend me?"

"I am afraid I haven't. Is it for Joan?"

"Yes. Something must be done. My hair is rapidly going grey! She has done nothing but ask me riddles since I arrived yesterday."

"I don't ask riddles," said Joan, indignantly. "I only ask questions. How am I to learn things if no one will tell me?"

"What do you want to know now?" asked Roger.

"I only wanted to know where the sausages go in the summer?" answered Joan, meekly.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Roger. "A conundrum! I give it up!"

"I only wanted to know," repeated Joan.

Jim passed his hand across his forehead with a look of despair.

"This is a sample of the kind of simple question I am expected to answer all day long."

"Sausages go with the Christmas Tree and Crackers," said Miss Price.

"Do they really?" asked Joan, eagerly. "Do you know, you are the only person who has ever been kind enough to answer me. It is so trying when no one will answer you when you really want to know. I suppose they go to the North Pole then."

"I think it is probable that the polar bears enjoy them," continued Miss Price, "until the icebergs come south and bring them back to England again."

"What sport did you have with the salmon, Jim?" asked Roger Bolding.

"Very fair indeed," replied Jim, who had just returned from fishing in Scotland for a fortnight, in between his constant visits to 'Trevor Lordship'; "mostly grilse."

"What are grilse?" asked Joan.

Jim dropped his head in his hands with a gesture of distraction.

"Darling child!" he moaned, "more conundrums!"

But Roger was equal to the occasion.

"A grilse, Joan," he said solemnly, "is a debutant salmon who has not yet done his Wanderjahr!"

Joan stared in bewilderment. Miss Price chuckled.

"Go and look that out in the dictionary, my love," said Jim, sweetly.

"I have fished those waters," continued Roger, "but not until later in the year. What flies did you use?" and he and Jim plunged into details of fishing accessories.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Aunt Eleanor?" asked Mildred. "Jim and I thought of going into Larnham to fetch the evening post."

"I shall be walking to the village later; but I have no particular plans."

"Joan is going to take me round the farm," said Miss Price; "and then we are going to see Lavender Hagger."

"Haven't you seen her yet?" asked Roger. "You have a treat in store for you. She is worth going miles to see. I wish there were better accounts of her son-in-law; he's a real wrong 'un."

"He hasn't been getting into trouble again, has he?" asked Eleanor, anxiously.

"Well, he only just managed to clear himself when Mr. Ford's keeper had that tussle with poachers in December. The chap is always poaching; and one day he'll get caught; and then he'll get it hot enough, for the police have had their eye on him for years."

"I have a sympathy with poachers," announced Miss Price.

"So have I," returned Roger, promptly; "but this man hasn't got the excuse half of them have. He's a skilled blacksmith, and could make his five and twenty shillings a week if he chose. He wouldn't work for untold gold; he prefers to loaf and poach and steal."

"Poor Bessie," said Eleanor, with a sigh.

"Yes, poor Bessie! but she went into it with her eyes open."

"I wonder if that makes any difference?" she said, gently.

"It was awfully funny!" continued Roger. "Last week at the Bench Sir George Lloyd had a man up before him for poaching. Well, you know, Sir George is no end of a sportsman, and the chap knew it. He had shot a pheasant under the keeper's nose, and there was no denying it; but knowing Sir George, he said in excuse, 'It was a good shot, you know, Sir Geaoge!' 'So it was!' retorted Sir George, quickly; 'a d—d good shot, but you get a month for it!' Every one roared with laughter, including the man himself."

"I do hope Bessie's husband will keep out of trouble," said Eleanor, presently, "for Lavender's sake."

"So do I; but I am afraid there is not much chance of it."

Mildred and Jim disappeared presently, and Miss Price and Joan departed for their tour of the farm. Bolding made no sign of any desire to seek Sir Henry; he had evidently forgotten the matter of the fencing, or perhaps it was not important.

"Are you going to be at home all the summer?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I love this place, and have no wish to go away, even for a day."

"It is looking lovely now."

"I couldn't bear to go away just as my new border was in bloom. I took such trouble over the planting."

"Jim is here again."

"Yes!" Eleanor smiled. "He doesn't seem to do much work, does he? But he told me last night that his father had promised him an assured position in the business, and that he was only taking a holiday before settling down to work."

"There is not much doubt as to what brings him here."

"No! there is not much doubt. They seem very happy in each other's society."

"What does your husband say about it?"

"I don't know. He has never mentioned it to me; I don't really know if he has noticed it."

"He must have seen it, surely," said Bolding, in surprise. "He would have stopped it months ago if he had not approved. It would be hard luck on them both if he had any reason against it, after having the boy here so constantly."

Eleanor felt certain in her own mind that the idea of Jim as a suitor for Mildred's hand had never crossed Sir Henry's mind; and Bolding's words presented the matter in a new light to her. She determined that she would speak to her husband about it without delay.

"It isn't likely he'll disapprove, is it?" he continued. "He is the only son of his father, who, by all accounts, is a rich man. They seem very devoted to each other. The only thing that might be said is that he is too young. But he has plenty of grit in him, has Master Jim, for all his larkiness. You are not against people marrying young, are you?"

"No! I don't think so. I don't quite see why they shouldn't, if they are fond of each other. Long engagements are difficult sometimes."

Bolding looked at her keenly.

"You were engaged for a long time, weren't you?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, yes!" said Eleanor, flushing. "But that was different."

She did not, however, explain where the difference lay.

"All the world seems marrying and giving in marriage," he continued, after a pause. "Two friends of mine have written to tell me of their engagements this week."

"Perhaps you will be the next," suggested Eleanor.

"No, I shall never marry."

"I have heard that the people who say they won't marry are generally the first to do so. Perhaps that will be the case with you."

"No," he repeated decidedly. "I shall never marry."

"Oh, you will when you meet the right woman," returned Eleanor, confidently, by which remark it would seem that her ideas on the subject had developed considerably. "I expect you haven't met her, or you would have done so before."

"I have met her, but meeting is not everything," he said quietly, so quietly that Eleanor did not appear to hear him. The truth was that her thoughts had flown in another direction. She was wondering whether Henry had come in, and whether he had slipped into the house without meeting her. In these days she found herself watching constantly and eagerly for him, and looking forward to the few words which passed between them at such meetings. But just then the stable clock struck four, and she knew that by this time he would be busily engaged in his library. He was absolutely regular in his hours, following the same routine from day to day, so his movements could always be counted on. With a strong sense of disappointment, she turned to her companion, trying to recollect the last words of their conversation.

Bolding had noticed her abstraction, and was sitting looking at her. There was a moment's pause, and then he said.

"I think I have missed Trevor. He has gone back to work now, I expect. I am so sorry."

Eleanor flushed at this voicing of her thoughts.

"Yes, he will be at his writing now. He said he had something he was particularly anxious to finish in time for this afternoon's post."

"He works very hard."

"Yes!" she answered quickly. "He works very hard. He is so keen about it. But he takes plenty of exercise, really; he is up very early in the morning, and always rides."

"Do you ride, too?"

"No, I can't ride. I wish I could, but I have never learnt. I think he likes riding alone, for I have an idea he plans his work for the day. I know it is seldom out of his thoughts."

"He must have been awfully out of it abroad," said Bolding. "I wonder he stayed so long."

"He could not help himself," replied Eleanor, quickly. "After fifteen years of exile it is no wonder that he is throwing himself into it with zest now. He was longing all the time to come home."

"I expect old Sir Henry would be pleased if he knew how much his library was appreciated," said Bolding, lightly. "He was tremendously proud of it, and used to take the books down, and dust them with his pocket handkerchief. I have seen him do it scores of times. I don't believe he ever opened one of them, though, for books were not much in his line. His only idea was hunting. It was his father who collected them, you know."

"No one could possibly appreciate them more than Henry," she said, smiling. "He told me he almost grudged a moment spent away from them!"

A curious expression flitted for an instant across Bolding's face, but he made no reply.

"I do feel anxious about Bessie," Eleanor said, a little later, referring to their previous words. "Would it be any good getting them to emigrate?"

"No, I don't think so," he answered. "Work would not be any more attractive on the other side than it is on this. If you like, I will ride over to-morrow and have a talk with him."

"Couldn't he take a game-keeper's place? I have heard that poachers make rather good game-keepers."

"On the principle of 'set a thief to catch a thief'! I don't know! However, I'll find him to-morrow. They are camped on Bunton Heath, I believe. I can easily find them. I will come over and tell you the result of my visit."

He rose as he spoke.

"That really would be kind," she said. "I would go myself, but I doubt whether Dobbs would be agreeable to my taking the horses so far."

"I'll go," he said cheerfully. "If there are any further little jobs I can do for you, I do hope you will tell me. Honour me with your commands," he added, with a jesting bow.

"I don't think I have any other commissions at

the moment," she replied, laughing at his manner. "It is very good of you to trouble about it."

"Oh! don't talk about trouble," he said almost brusquely. "How can it be any trouble? It is a very little thing to do for y—" he stopped, and changed his tone to its former lightness. "It is just a pleasant excuse for a ride. That's all. Good-bye, Lady Trevor; remember me to your husband. I am sorry not to have seen him."

CHAPTER XIV

WORDS AND THEIR MEANING

"O, how this spring of love resembleth
Th' uncertain glory of an April day.
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away!"

— *Two Gentlemen of Verona.*

"WHAT a number of letters by this evening's post! Who brought them?" asked Sir Henry.

"Jim and I walked in to fetch them," replied Mildred.

"Well, I think, if you will excuse me, I will go and attend to them. I am rather expecting one or two which I know will require an immediate answer."

He gathered up his budget as he spoke, and walked towards the library. Dinner was just over, and the rest of the party strolled to the front door.

"What a perfect night!" said Eleanor. "Did you ever see such a moon? It is as light as day."

"Come out," said Jim, giving a general invitation, but with his eyes on Mildred.

"No, thank you!" answered Miss Price. "However beautiful it may look, I am not going to court rheumatism in my old bones! You may go and

court each other, if you like. You are young. That makes a great difference!"

"Put on something warm, if you are really going, Mildred," said Eleanor. "I am sure it is much colder than it looks."

"Come with us," said the girl, laying her hand on Eleanor's arm. "Do come."

"I think I will content myself with seeing the beauty of the night from the drawing-room window," was Eleanor's laughing reply. "Now, Jim, you must come in in a few minutes, and don't let her catch cold."

He wrapped Mildred in a big fur coat which was hanging up close by, and together they strolled down the drive, which lay like a silver ribbon in the brilliant light.

"Well, you may say what you like," said Miss Price, decidedly, as she pulled up her skirts, and tucked her feet on the fender. "Moonlight is all very well for young people, — moon and mooning; but give me a comfortable chair by the hearth, after the sun has gone down."

Eleanor looked at her with affection, as she stirred the fire into a blaze. It ought perhaps to be explained that the mystery of the mushroom hat had been solved on the first evening of the old lady's arrival. The report current in her home village was that she slept in it; but this proved to be untrue.

She wore in the place of it a small, black lace mantilla, arranged over her snow-white hair, which was drawn high over a cushion in an old-fashioned but extremely becoming style. She looked very charming and picturesque.

"It is nice having you here," Eleanor said. "I only wish you could stay longer. Only another week, and the last one has gone like a flash."

"I wish I could stay, but it is impossible. I have a hundred and one things waiting to be seen to at home. But I do enjoy being here, and shall picture you better in my mind now that I know your house, and all."

"It is a delicious house, isn't it?" said Eleanor, warmly. "There is something friendly about it, as if all the generations who have lived in it had each left something towards the home feeling, which was bequeathed as a legacy to future inhabitants."

"'All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses,'"

quoted Miss Price, softly.

"Yes, that is just it. It makes such a difference when you feel like that. Lots of people wouldn't in the least understand what I meant. Don't you remember, a little further on in the same poem, Longfellow says: —

"'The stranger at my fireside cannot see
The forms I see, nor hear the sounds I hear,

He but perceives what is — while unto me
All that has been is visible and clear.
We have no title deeds to house or lands;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands
And hold in mortmain still their old estates!'

I was reading it only yesterday. It pleases me so much to think of other people who have lived their lives here. Did they think the same thoughts, I wonder?"

"I know what you mean," said her friend. "I have the same feeling myself for my little old cottage. I wouldn't live in a new house, personally, if you paid me to do so. Association goes for so much more than people realize in these busy days. You have a charming home, my dear, and are fortunate enough to be able to appreciate it. Your life is very full just now, with these nice young people, and all."

"Yes!" returned Eleanor; "and I do enjoy it. I think I must have got into a very stupid state before — before I married; but now everything is quite different. I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "if it is possible for a heart to be born again after having been dead, or at least withered?"

"I am sure it is," was the quiet answer. "We know a soul can be born again; why not a heart? But there must be birth-pangs, my child. Nothing human can be brought to life without labour and pain. Human love least of all."

Eleanor did not reply for some time; she sat gazing into the fire. Then she began to speak quickly, almost as if compelled to against her will.

"I could not understand for a long time what had made the difference; but at last I knew. It was love. Did I love Henry when I was a girl, long ago? I do not know. But I do know now that love shows you everything in a different light. You live! Without it, or, perhaps I should say, without the knowledge of it, you don't live, you only exist. I have learnt so much lately — I am humble with the greatness of it."

And all the time Miss Price was thinking — thinking what the new heart of hers would do when it grew too large to live upon itself, and felt the necessity of another heart to join with it to make one perfect whole. The thought of it gripped her with a fierceness which was like physical pain, but after a while her practical mind reasserted itself. There was nothing she could do; she must leave it alone. It would be cruelty — base, useless cruelty — to tell her that human love is crippled — maimed — unless it finds its complement, even though parting follow swiftly. No, Eleanor must suffer her own pain, for life and death are the two things which no one may bear for another, the two great mysteries which come straight from the hand of God to the individual alone. Friends can only wait and pray.

Presently Eleanor asked, "Do you think Mildred will be happy with Jim? for I think he wants to marry her."

"So far as I can see, she ought to be. I like the young man. He has that blessed inheritance, a cheerful temperament, which is such a great help in life. He looks a clean, honest gentleman, and I think he is really fond of her. Judging by appearances, of course."

"I shall speak to Henry about it to-night. Personally, I like Jim very much, and I do want Mildred to be happy. There is Daudet barking, so I expect they are coming in."

She rose from her position by the fire, as the two young people entered. Jim came straight forward, holding Mildred by the hand.

"Lady Trevor," he said, "Mildred has promised to be my wife. Will you wish us well?"

Eleanor clasped the girl in her arms, while Miss Price said, with a chuckle: —

"I hope you don't expect us to be surprised!"

"I do," answered Jim; "I was! Though of course I can't say I had no hope."

"I should think not!" she retorted.

"I do hope you will both be very happy," said Eleanor, warmly.

"I know I shall be," he returned; "and I think I can make her happy. At all events, I am going to have a very good try."

"I am going to bed," said Miss Price, after a while. "I am too old for these late hours. Bless you, my children, and good-night!"

Eleanor sat down again, and had a long talk with the lovers. Jim was full of hopeful plans for the future, and spoke with a new earnestness.

"When my father gave me an assured position in the business, I stipulated for six months' holiday. I have worked since I left Harrow, and I think I was entitled to it. Also it was always Mildred," he said, smiling; "and I wanted to wait until she was eighteen, so that no one could say we were too young to know our own minds."

"Doesn't he talk as if he were fifty?" laughed Mildred. "He is only six years older than I am."

"Six years make a vast difference," he insisted. "Don't you think we might be married very soon, Lady Trevor? and then we could have our honeymoon before my time is up. I suppose I could not see Sir Henry to-night?"

"Oh, no!" cried Mildred. "He doesn't like being disturbed in the evenings. It will be much better to wait until to-morrow."

"I can understand your being impatient; but really I think you had better wait until the morning."

Eleanor was determined to see her husband, and prepare his mind for the interview.

"And will you let Mildred come down very soon, and see my people?" continued Jim. "They are awfully fond of her, and I know they will be awfully pleased."

"Of course she shall come. I am sure you will want to take her to your mother as soon as possible."

"I think I had better go home and tell them myself," he went on. "I will go to-morrow afternoon, after I have seen Sir Henry. I will come back again the next day, if I may."

"You will let him come, won't you, Aunt Eleanor?" asked Mildred. She spoke so pleadingly that Eleanor laughed. There was no doubt of the love these two young people felt for each other; no one could deny it who saw them together now.

"Silly child," she said tenderly, "of course he shall come every day, and all day. Do you think of setting up house in London?" she added.

"We must," replied Mildred, "because of Jim's work."

"I suppose you will have to get Lady Vernon's permission too, won't you?"

"By Jove!" said Jim, "I had forgotten all about her. Yes, I suppose I must. But there won't be any difficulties. There can't be. My darling, we are much too happy to think of difficulties."

About an hour afterwards, Eleanor opened the

library door gently, and walked in. The room was rather dark, except just where the two shaded lamps made circles of light, one by the writing-table and one by the arm-chair on the hearth. A big bowl of lilac struck a pleasant note of colour, just where the rays of light faded into the dark background of books.

She shut the door behind her, and walked a few steps forward. She was always conscious of a feeling of intrusion when she entered her husband's sanctum, and was rather nervous in consequence. Sir Henry was sitting writing at his table, and did not move.

"I am so sorry to disturb you," she said; "but can I speak to you for a moment?"

"I beg your pardon?" he said absently, stroking the back of his head with his hand. Eleanor did not notice this action, or she would have realized that he was worried about something.

Eleanor crossed the room, and stood in front of him, with the width of the table between them.

"Can I speak to you for a moment?" she repeated gently.

Sir Henry laid down his pen, and pushed his chair back from the table.

"Certainly," he said. "What is it?"

"It is about Jim and Mildred. No doubt you have noticed — Jim would like to see you in the morning, to ask your consent to their engagement."

"My consent!" he said quickly. "I shall most certainly refuse my consent to any such nonsense. They are much too young. I had no idea of anything of the kind."

"Jim is very fond of her," said Eleanor, shyly.

Something in his manner alarmed her, and she felt she was not putting her case well. Sir Henry rose suddenly.

"How does he know that? What does a boy of that age know of his feelings? How does he know whether she is a suitable woman to make a home for him? How does he know if he wants to be tied to her for the rest of his life — at his age? No!" he said, with some heat, "I cannot give my consent." He had grasped a letter in one hand, and was striking it with the other to emphasize his words. "I do not approve of early engagements. They have wrecked men's lives before now."

His words, and the feeling with which they were spoken, fell like blows upon Eleanor's heart. Her face turned perfectly white, and for a moment the whole room seemed to whirl round her, and she made a clutch at the edge of the table for support.

Sir Henry sat down again. Slowly Eleanor turned and walked towards the door. She was striving with all her might to find words to speak. Mildred's dream of love must not be shattered like this, if it was possible to help. She must make an effort to alter his

decision. Her fingers had closed round the handle of the door, when she turned, and stood, still holding it, and half leaning against the door; her white face and white frock outlined on the dark mahogany, a bunch of violets lying like a blot upon her breast. She always wore violets in these days. Sir Henry did not look at her; his thoughts were elsewhere. Presently she raised her head.

"There is something I must say," she said, rather hoarsely, but quite distinctly, "and it is this. Do you think that it is just to have had Jim Lucas here time after time, when every one could see that he was in love with Mildred, and then to refuse your consent? Would it not have been kinder to have forbidden it months ago — before Christmas? You have tacitly countenanced the affair until now, and now you would refuse your consent. Is it just?"

Then she turned and went out of the room.

"Eleanor," called Sir Henry, but she made no answer, as she shut the door quietly behind her.

Sir Henry sat with his head on his hands for some time. "Poor lad!" he said at last. "Poor lad!" The letter he had been holding lay on the table before him. It had a deep border of black, and the envelope which lay beside it bore the Australian postmark.

Sir Henry's thoughts were bitter ones. "Poor Oscar Glyn," he was thinking; "if ever there was a

boy of promise, it was he. Oh! I am right in condemning these early marriages. Look at him, married at one and twenty to a pretty, feckless girl of seventeen, no money, no prospects."

He thought of the scenes he had witnessed the last time he had ridden down to Glyn's small holding. The poverty and untidiness visible on all sides. The ailing drab of a woman, scarcely more than a girl, from whose face every trace of comeliness had been erased by ill health and discontent. He could see her plainly now, standing in the dingy room with an infant in her arms, while four other children crawled or sat about on the floor.

And all the while Oscar Glyn struggling manfully against overwhelming odds, against the knowledge that the woman he had married was entirely unsuitable and unfit to be any help to him in his Colonial life; that what love she had professed for him had not survived the first breath of discomfort. Could he blame her, when he was conscious that his own was waning?

All this he had confessed to Trevor — who could hear the man's broken voice echoing in his ears now. And — here — to-day — was the end. The ringing down of the curtain — Lights out! A long summer of drought and fever had put the coping-stone on his misfortunes, and extinguished the last spark of his courage; and he had put a bullet through his brain.

It was the piteous letter from the young widow which had reached Trevor that evening. He had been fond of Glyn, and had more than once helped him financially since his return to England; and at this moment a stamped and addressed envelope lay beside his cheque-book on the table.

Presently he rose, and began to pace up and down the room, thinking of Eleanor's words; and finally he came to the conclusion that she was right. He had been to blame in that he had not noticed the meaning of Jim's visits. He had been much occupied; and although he had seen that he and Mildred were frequently together, he had attached no importance to it. Eleanor was right. If he had wished to interfere, he should have done so sooner. Well! he would have a talk with the boy in the morning, and thrash the matter out, and do his best for them. Eleanor had seemed anxious about it. She was evidently in favor of the marriage, and he would very much like to do as she wished about it. She had left the room hastily, he remembered; he hoped he had not spoken very abruptly, but his mind had been full of the tragedy of Oscar Glyn's wrecked life.

"I hope I was not unkind about it," he said to himself. "Is it possible that Eleanor was vexed about it? I do trust not."

It never for one moment struck him that his words might have held for his wife another and very

natural interpretation. He forgot that she knew nothing of Oscar Glyn. He was one of those men for whom their personal affairs are subject to no criticism, and do not come within the range of any argument. It would never have seemed possible to him that his own engagement, dating from his twenty-fourth year, could have been considered to be a case in point. But he was conscious of a very keen desire to do what Eleanor wished about it. He would like to please her in this, as it seemed that she had set her heart on it. He returned to his writing with the determination to arrange the affair in the best way, in the morning.

CHAPTER XV

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM

"But there's nothing half so sweet in life
As love's young dream."

— Moore.

"He was awfully nice about it all," said Jim. "In fact, he couldn't have been nicer. He said of course that we must wait for Lady Vernon's permission before announcing our engagement, but that he would write to her to-day."

Jim and Mildred were walking up and down the path under the great stone pine, and he was recounting his interview with Sir Henry.

"Did Aunt Eleanor speak to him, I wonder?" said Mildred. "I think she meant to; but she seemed so tired and silent this morning that I didn't like to ask her. Oh, Jim! — I was so afraid Uncle Henry objected, and that she didn't like to tell me."

"It is quite all right, darling. There is nothing to worry about. There is no earthly reason why Lady Vernon should interfere. Oh, yes! I am sure Lady Trevor put in a good word for us, because Sir Henry said she seemed in favour of our marriage. You know the booky way he talks! He said that personally he was of opinion that we were too young,

and talked to me a lot about the necessity of our thoroughly weighing the matter. He asked whether we were sure we knew our own minds, and all that sort of thing. As if there could be any doubt about that!" added Jim, with youthful scorn. "Then he talked a little business, and I was able to satisfy him about that. He really was awfully jolly at the end. I liked his coming out to you in the hall, and saying he hoped we should both be very happy, didn't you?"

"I have always liked Uncle Henry, he has been so kind to us since we came here. Of course he is very quiet, and doesn't join much in the things we do, but he never speaks crossly or worries. Now you would never think twice about anything you wanted to say to Aunt Eleanor. She would always understand exactly what you meant. Jim! do you think your people will be pleased?"

"Silly little girl!" he said tenderly. "How often are you going to ask me that? Of course they will love you. They do already! No one could help it. Dear old Mum! It seems rather a stupid thing to say, but she would be pleased at anything I was pleased at. Besides, they must have guessed how it was."

"Dear old Jim!" she said. "You are such a nice, happy person. I wish I was more like you — always certain that everything is going to be all right."

"Oh, no, I'm not! When I do get down in my luck, I am down to the depths — bed rock! But now I have got you, sweetheart, that is never going to happen again. We shall be happy every day of our lives. Now, dearest, the carriage will be round in ten minutes. This is our good-bye, for I suppose I must not kiss you at the station! It might scandalize the porters! Not that I should care much," — he laughed in his frank, boyish way. "Good-bye, my little wife that is to be. Remember we belong to each other for always, and don't worry your dear little head about anything."

"You will come back soon," she whispered. "The time will be long until you come back."

"To-morrow if I possibly can; if not, the next day."

They lingered over their last words, as lovers will, all the world over, until Joan came flying down the path at her usual breakneck pace.

"You must come, you two! There's Dobbs just getting on the box to drive round. Come along! May I drive with you to the station?"

"You may sit in front with Dobbs, and if you are very good, perhaps he will let you hold the end of the reins!" said Jim.

"I don't want to hold the end of the reins! I am not a baby!" returned Joan, with some heat. "Why, I drove the pair all myself the other day, only that was with William. I think," she added, dropping

her voice confidentially, "that Dobbs is just a tiny bit jealous! He doesn't seem to like other people to drive his horses while he is there. He must know I can drive. I have told him I am quite to be trusted."

"I think, on the whole, I rather agree with Dobbs," laughed Jim.

Joan was in a great state of excitement over the engagement. To have her beloved Jim as a real brother was a truly delightful thing. The only point which exercised her mind was, whether she should go and live with them when they were married. If she did so, it would mean leaving Uncle Henry and Aunt Eleanor, and Dobbs! She felt torn both ways, but Mildred assured her that there was no reason to decide the question at present.

"I can't think what is the matter with Aunt Eleanor," said Mildred, as they drove away. "She does seem so unlike herself."

"Perhaps she has got a headache," suggested Jim. Manlike, he felt that this was the explanation of every feminine mood.

"Do you think she and Uncle Henry have had any — well — disagreement? I have never even heard them contradict each other, so I hardly think it can be that. I do hope she will be better to-morrow."

Jim was so full of high hopes and good spirits that he really could not feel any interest even in

Lady Trevor, whom he much admired. His whole thoughts were of Mildred and their mutual happiness, and their talk turned in that direction.

He had plenty of time to think during his journey in the train. As he had said to Mildred, he had no fears for the future. What should he fear? His parents were always ready to give him his own way; they had never denied him anything in his life; there was no reason to suppose that they would wish to begin now. He knew his mother wanted him to marry; she had told him so repeatedly.

How odd, really, that Sir Henry had brought so many arguments to bear against their engagement! He had not told Mildred all; but it was a fact. At the commencement of their conversation he had plainly said that he was inclined to disapprove; and yet as Jim had frankly answered his numerous questions, he had quite come round, and had finally been "awfully nice about it."

"I expect we have to thank Lady Trevor for it, really," he said to himself. "Why! he was engaged himself for many years, at least so I have heard, and he isn't so wonderfully old now." And then he thought of Mildred, and started building castles in that enchanted land which man and maid enter hand in hand with the first words of avowed love, and where no one may follow, for it is Holy Ground.

Jim had only spoken the truth when he had said

to Eleanor that "it was always Mildred." Ever since the day he had first seen her, a slight slip of a girl of sixteen,—old and perhaps grave beyond her years by reason of her mothering of little Joan,—he had thought of no other woman. He had determined to win her for his wife, and had set his face steadily towards the goal of his hopes. He had lived for her, and for her love; and now it had been granted to him, and though humble in his heart towards her, as all true lovers should be, he was certain of his power to ensure her future happiness.

He had realized that it would only be courting opposition to propose to her before he was in an independent position. His father had never stinted him in the way of money, but Jim had liked to feel that his own brain and hands would provide the wherewithal to start his married life. He did not wish to be entirely dependent, even on his father's bounty, but now he had felt he could honestly ask Mildred to share his lot. At the same time, he knew, of course, that he might rely on his father to supply the jam for the bread and butter!

It was late that evening before he reached Wimbledon, and the station fly turned into the gates of Mr. Lucas's house, 'Grove Lodge.' It was approached by the usual suburban carriage drive, bordered on either side with shrubs. By dint of numerous turns and twists, the ingenious person who had laid out the

gardens had given more importance to the "drive" than it deserved. The house stood within fifty yards of the high road, but by dint of serpentine windings round small plantations of evergreens and miniature forests of larch-trees, the distance was trebled. In fact, Mrs. Lucas considered it quite a long walk to the gate.

The house itself was noticeable for want of taste on the part of the builder. It was an example of "early Victorian" ugliness inside and out, but undoubtedly well appointed and comfortable. Neat little muslin blinds, with neat little brass strips at the top of them, blinked like so many welcoming eyes from its many windows. The substantial porch possessed the most elaborate appliances, which dumbly insisted that no one would be so thoughtless as to take any mud on to the spotless doorstep, while the large cocoanut mat displayed the magic word SALVE, in bold red letters. Even Mrs. Lucas's hospitable mind could think of nothing further to provide for the comfort of her guests.

As Jim entered, his father walked out to meet him, already dressed for dinner. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, with a snow-white beard and hair, and a kindly expression. Although nearly seventy, he held himself very erect, as if the years weighed but lightly on him.

"There you are, my boy," he said, "just in time

for dinner! Hurry up and have a wash; you needn't dress. Mother is glad to have you back again."

"Right you are! I shan't be a minute," responded Jim, as he ran up the stairs two steps at a time.

Mr. Lucas rejoined his wife.

"He's come, Mother!" he said cheerfully, "alive and well. No railway accidents, and no runaway horses!"

Mrs. Lucas hoisted herself from the depths of a huge saddle-bag arm-chair.

"Well!" she said, panting slightly, "you never know, do you? People want to go so fast these days that things are always happening. I never look in the papers without seeing that some one has been killed, and I always think it might be Jim! It is enough to make any one nervous. There!" she said, "come along, Father, I'm ready!"

One of the chief sorrows of Mrs. Lucas's later life was her excessive size. She was enormously stout; and this, combined with a rheumatic tendency, made her movements slow and difficult. She fondly hoped that her deliberate progression gave an idea of dignity; but she was exceedingly good-natured, and was quite ready to laugh at herself, as a cushion, and a mountain, and other such playful terms.

By the time she had reached the door, Jim arrived, and she folded him to her capacious bosom with demonstrative affection. Then they proceeded to din-

ner, and during the meal she plied him with questions as to his doings, his health, etc.

It was not until the dessert had been placed on the table, and the servants had left the room, that he was able to impart the great news that trembled on his lips. He began to feel a little nervous about it. The thought struck him that never again would they three sit there, as they had sat for so many years, all family ties complete in one another. His heart and life would be elsewhere. It seemed suddenly hard on the old parents. He hesitated for a choice of words, and then he said: —

"I have something to tell you dear people. I know you will be pleased at my happiness, and I am very, very happy. Mildred has promised to marry me."

"Dearest boy!" ejaculated his mother. "I am delighted; I can't tell you how delighted I am."

Jim looked at his father, waiting for him to speak. Mr. Lucas's eyes were fixed upon his wife with an inscrutable expression.

"You are very young, my boy," he said at last. "It is a great responsibility."

"I know," said Jim, gravely. "I have thought of all that. Sir Henry Trevor said I was too young at first; but afterwards he gave his consent. I do hope you will do the same, Father," he asked, anxiously.

"I am very fond of Mildred," said the old man. "You should be proud to have won her."

"Dear child!" murmured Mrs. Lucas.

"I am proud, more proud than I can say. We love each other, and I think I can make her happy; that is the chief thing."

"Well, well!" said his father, "I had no idea that you were old enough to think of being married. The years pass so quickly. Perhaps I ought to have foreseen this."

"Young people will be young people," said Mrs. Lucas, with a beaming smile; "and I must say there is no one I should have liked better for your wife than Mildred, whom I have known from a child."

"I was sure you would be pleased. Mildred was wondering how you would welcome her, but I knew you loved her already."

"When do you think of being married?"

"As soon as possible," replied Jim, promptly. "There is no reason why we should wait, that I can see."

"You'll come and live close to us, won't you?" she suggested. "There is a nice little house in Cecil Road to be let, not ten minutes' walk from here. I saw the board up this morning, and Mrs. Davies, who was having tea with me, told me she knew of a very good cook wanting a situation. I'll write to her to-morrow."

Jim laughed, and his father said:—

"Wait a little, Mother. You are going too fast! The date isn't fixed yet."

"Lady Vernon must be consulted first," said Jim. "She is Mildred's other guardian, you know; but I hope she will be nice about it."

"I don't see how she can be otherwise," declared Mrs. Lucas, bridling like an old hen whose chicken has been attacked. "You will have plenty to keep a wife, and you have known Mildred for years. What more can a woman want?"

"Well, my boy," said his father, rising, "I approve of your choice, and agree with Mother that you couldn't have done better. I own I was surprised at first, for we old folks don't always see that the young ones are growing up."

Mrs. Lucas was already furnishing her son's house in her own mind. "There's that blue dinner service," she said to herself, as she rolled into the drawing-room; "Jim always has been fond of that. Old things are better than you can buy nowadays; that will do them nicely. Then there's a pile of good table-cloths I have got put away, double damask, they are, with never a sign of wear." When she reached her chair, she took a piece of paper and a pencil from a table beside her, and began to make elaborate calculations, as to what domestic articles would be required for the new house.

Jim and Mr. Lucas laughed when they saw her occupation, but she answered good-humouredly: —

"Ah! this is the mother's job. Who is to do it

for you, if I don't! The silver we started with will do them nicely for a while. They could have that, couldn't they, Father? Jim would like to have what we started with ourselves."

"We shall not get a word out of her, Jim," said his father, still laughing. "We'll go and have our talk out in the library," and taking his son's arm, he marched him off, leaving the old lady to her plans for the future.

CHAPTER XVI

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

"I am not now
That which I have been."

— BYRON, *Childe Harold.*

"AT what time did you leave 'Trevor Lordship'?" asked Mr. Lucas, as they lit their cigars, and sat down in his comfortable room.

"About twelve o'clock," returned Jim. "They've put on a good train now in the middle of the day."

"How odd it seems! Why, I remember, when I was a young man, before I left England, if you wanted to get to Larnham, you had to take the coach at Townborough, where the junction is now. No one thought of the railway being carried farther in those days. — Did you touch upon money matters in your conversation with Sir Henry?"

"I told him a certain amount, — what you allowed me, and what I drew from the firm. He seemed to be quite satisfied. I didn't know what you would be prepared to do in the way of settlements."

Mr. Lucas took out a pencil, and jotted down some figures on his shirt-cuff.

"Roughly speaking, about thirty thousand. I

should think you could settle about thirty thousand."

"It's awfully good of you," said Jim, gratefully.

"I believe in making a good provision," replied his father; and then he plunged still further into financial details.

"I've very nearly unloaded in British Columbia now, and put it all into securities at home. I don't want any anxiety about money in my old age. The business is right enough, and will go on paying just as long as you have honest agents, and no longer. I have sometimes thought of sending you over there; but I didn't want to part with you. So I made a little pile outside, which will be plenty for you and yours. Things have altered since I was young. I can't keep up with the rush now, so I am glad to stay safely outside it. But there will be plenty for you. I've tied it up quite tight."

Jim tried to keep his thoughts on the subject on hand, but all the while they were flying back to Mildred. His mother's words had brought things very near to him. He could hardly believe in his great happiness. Was it true that the little home she had spoken of would really soon exist? He had no idea that it was possible to feel so happy. The world had always been a jolly good place, but now it was flooded with a golden light; not one thing would he wish different.

Then he came back to the present, to find that his father had ceased speaking, and was sitting with his hands on his knees in an attitude of abstraction. It was not his wont to look so serious, and Jim felt a little surprised. There was something unusual in his expression.

"I can't thank you enough, father," he said. "You are awfully kind."

Mr. Lucas made no reply, but after a while he rose, and relighted his cigar, which had gone out. Then he turned, and threw his head up with the sudden action of a man who has come to a decision, and said quickly: —

"There is something I think I ought to tell you, Jim. I have wished to do so several times in your life, but I have allowed myself to be overruled by your mother. I think if I had realized that you were old enough to think of matrimony, I should have insisted upon telling you before. Not that it is anything that will make the slightest difference to your life or your prospects; I can promise you that; but I think you ought to know."

"What is it?" asked Jim, nervously. He wished his father would come to the point, but the old man seemed to find a difficulty in doing so.

"I can promise you it will make no difference in your prospects," he repeated. "I have made my will most carefully, and provided for every contingency."

"Can't you tell me what it is?"

Jim was trying to shake off a feeling of dread, a premonition of coming trouble which was creeping over him. Again there was a pause. Mr. Lucas stood holding his cigar and gazing at the end of it as if to draw inspiration from its smouldering heart. Then he said slowly: —

"You are my adopted son."

"What in the world do you mean?" Jim thought for a moment that his father had lost his reason.

"You are my adopted son," he said again. "The circumstances were as follows. We came back from British Columbia in 1880. Your mother had never borne a child, could never bear one; and was half broken-hearted about it. We had only been home a few days, and were staying at an hotel near Victoria Station, when we were awaked by a cry of fire. We dressed and went out. It was a house in Ebury Street which was burning. You were saved, and we took you home with us. Every one else was burned, and the house was completely gutted. I advertised, and did all I could to find your relatives, but without success. Your mother and nurse were believed to have been among the victims of the disaster; but beyond that, I know nothing."

Jim sat staring at the speaker. His face had turned very white.

"Then who am I?" he asked, in a curiously strained voice.

"You are my dearly loved son," said the old man, stoutly, "just as you have been all along."

The solid ground seemed to be crumbling away beneath Jim's feet; he was vainly trying to regain his balance. Where was he? Who was he? He couldn't understand. He hardly heard the speaker in the tumult of his mind.

"We had only just come back from abroad," continued Mr. Lucas; "and no one among our few friends ever doubted but what you were our own son, born while we were out there. Among the hotel people and the police who knew, of course, it was a nine days' wonder, and then forgotten. I provided for the burial of the poor dead, and a few days afterwards a man brought us a desk which had been saved from the room where you were found. It was quite empty; the contents had evidently been stolen. I have all the papers which reported the affair; you can see them if you like."

And still the same question was beating like a hammer in Jim's brain: "Who am I? Who am I?" He looked wildly round the familiar room; he had no business to be there! He was an interloper! His eyes fell upon a large print of Frith's 'Derby Day,' which hung over the mantelpiece. The picture had held a peculiar fascination for him ever since he could

remember, particularly the little figure in the foreground. Ah! — that was it! A mountebank! A nameless mountebank, that was what he was. Playing a part — pretending to be the only son of a rich, respectable father, when all the time he hadn't even a name of his own! He rose from his chair, clutching at the arm of it to steady himself as he did so.

"I wish to God you had left me in the gutter where I belonged!" he said fiercely, between his clenched teeth.

For a moment the old man recoiled at the bitterness in his tone, then he laid his hand gently on his shoulder.

"Boy! Boy!" he said soothingly, "what has come over you? Don't say a thing like that. You are my dearly loved son; nothing can alter that."

"It is a lie!" cried Jim, furiously. "You! calling yourself an honest man, have brought me up never to tell a lie; and all the time you were living one, and letting me live one. Letting me masquerade as the son of a gentleman, when all the time I am a nameless nobody. Letting me win Mildred's love under false pretences. Oh, God! —"

He threw himself down again in his chair, and buried his face in his hands. Mr. Lucas tottered where he stood, and feebly passed his hand across his eyes as if to brush away some delusion. He had grown ten years older in as many minutes.

"You are my son," he repeated stubbornly. "My dearly loved son."

They sat there, as they had sat so often, on either side of the familiar hearth, — they who, in spite of the disparity in their ages, had been such friends, such pals, divided now by a gulf of misery which yawned at their feet. The clock ticked the leaden minutes with slow deliberation, until sixty of them had been recorded. Neither spoke. Then Jim rose.

"Good-night," he said formally, and walked towards the door.

"Jim!" cried the old man. "Jim! don't go like that!"

For a second the ghost of a smile crossed Jim's face, such a wan, heart-broken attempt at reassurance, but he spoke no word, and the door shut with a dull, hopeless reverberation.

He passed up the stairs, and entered his room. Without turning on the light, he flung himself face downwards on the bed. Then something gave way in his brain, and in the quiet of the dark room there came the dreadful sound of a man's uncontrollable sobbing. Where were his dreams for the future? Withered and dead as last year's roses. What of that little house which had filled his thoughts (already it seemed years ago)? already it had fallen to its very foundations, as a house built upon the sand.

He had been so proud of his father, so proud of his line of sturdy, North Country ancestors — not nobly born, it is true — but honest, God-fearing gentlemen, such as have been for centuries the backbone of England — and he had no part or lot in them! Only one thing stood out clear among chaos, and that was that in honour he must give up all thought of Mildred. He had not even a name to give her. He might even be base-born! — he ground his teeth together at the thought. No, they must part — his dream was shattered; he must get used to the idea. Her love must be put on one side, with all the other precious things of the past. Her beauty was not for him. Those sweet intimacies of married life which he had dared to picture could never, never be. He must see her once more, he must hold her once more in his arms, and then he must go out into the darkness — alone.

Mrs. Lucas came to the end of her pleasant task, and, glancing at the clock, discovered that the hour was past eleven. Hoisting herself to her feet, she proceeded to the library door, where she listened for a moment. She did not wish to disturb a private conversation, although in her opinion it had lasted long enough. There was no sound to be heard, and she walked in.

"Why, Father!" she cried, at the sight of her hus-

band; "are you ill? And wherever is Jim? My dear, my dear! whatever is the matter?"

The old man slowly raised his lined face.

"I have told him," he said simply; "and he has taken it badly."

"Told him what?"

"Told him of his adoption."

Every trace of colour faded from Mrs. Lucas's large, round face.

"You have told him!" she stammered. "How could you be so cruel?"

"It was right to tell him," protested the old man feebly; "and it can't make any difference."

"What did he say?" enquired his wife in a frightened whisper.

"He said, 'I wish to God you had left me in the gutter where I belonged.'"

Mrs. Lucas gave a moaning cry. Slowly her eyes filled; the large, fat tears coursed one another down the terraces of her many chins, and splashed, unheeded, on her black satin bosom. She raised no hand to wipe them away.

"You have done a cruel thing," she moaned, in broken accents. "Oh, Frederick! Frederick! he was mine, my very own; and you have taken him away from me. He knew no mother but me! I have nursed him, and fondled him, and prayed for him, and reared him. The other woman only bore him!

What is a year or two of babyhood against all the precious time of childhood and boyhood? He is mine — my very own!"

"I did not know he would take it like this," said Mr. Lucas, in a quavering voice.

The two old people gazed at each other through a mist of tears.

"I shall go to him," she said at last. "He has always wanted me in his little troubles."

She pulled herself up the stairs with infinite difficulty — one step at a time. It was the first time she could remember for years that either Jim or Frederick had not helped her up in the evening; and all the while she was thinking — thinking.

She turned towards her boy's room, and then changed her mind, and entered her own. "The beads are prickly to the face," she murmured, as she divested herself of her elaborate dress, all satin and bugles and jet, and arrayed herself in a soft old wadded silk dressing-gown. It was very unbecoming, but it had associations; trouble and sickness had always been comforted in the old red dressing-gown. That tear on the breast, which showed plainly in spite of careful darning, had been made by Jim's teeth, when they had set his leg four years before! He had, as she had said, always wanted her in his little troubles.

All the mother love was fiercely awake in the heart

of the woman, transfiguring her plain, homely face with a new power, which was near akin to the Divine.

The inscrutable wisdom of God had ordained that she, endowed beyond most women with the capacity for maternal affection, should be barren; but to her starved heart and empty arms He had sent this little child. If she had borne him, he could not be more hers; she had told herself this over and over again in the first great joy of his possession; for had she not been singled out of all the women in the world to mother him?

He was her baby; no one should take him from her. She would fight the world for him, if needs be, but she would keep him. God give her strength to keep him! She was praying with all her soul as she made her slow way along the corridor, and without knocking, turned the handle and entered his room. She turned on one shaded light, and glanced towards the bed where Jim was lying, motionless, inert, spent with the storm of emotion through which he had passed. She did not speak, but struck a match and lit the fire; the nights were chilly still, and she knew that what must be spoken between them could not be said in an hour, or even two. When the blaze had fairly started, she pushed a sofa up near the hearth, and having thus completed her preparations, she moved towards the bed.

Jim's face was hidden on his folded arms, and she

laid her hand on his head, gently stroking the rumpled hair with a loving touch. Presently he moved a little.

"It is mother," she said softly.

He raised a drawn, white face.

"You are not my mother," he said huskily; and his face went down again with a groan. The iron had entered deep.

The old lady did not reply. She was praying that she might be guided in her choice of words. She continued the soothing movement with her hand for a while, and then she said: —

"You are cold, dear lad; will you not come to the fire? There are things I must say to you."

Gently, and with loving words, she roused him, and drew him to the sofa, where they sat down side by side.

"Boy," she said, reverting to the old name of childhood, "we have done you wrong. I see it now; but will you hear my story before you turn from me? I had been married nearly twenty years, and we loved each other truly, my husband and I; but we had no child. Night and day I stormed the doors of Heaven with my prayers, but without avail. I do not know how much you have been told, so I will tell the story in my own way.

"Soon after we arrived in England from British Columbia I saw a doctor, who told me I could never

have a child; and I think I went nearly mad with grief. One night, when I was lying worn out in my bed at the hotel, I heard a cry of 'Fire,' and started up in fear. Father woke, and we ran to the window. We could see a house blazing a little way away. I could not tell what drove me, but I had to go; even Father could not stay me, though I was weak and ill; but when I saw you carried down the ladder from the blazing house, just as the roof fell in, I knew that God had sent me in answer to my prayer. Father told me afterwards that I fought my way through the crowd like a mad woman, until I had you in my arms, and my empty heart was filled.

"We thought you were about four years old; and you were very ill for a long time, but gradually you grew strong, and brave, and beautiful. I had only one terror, and that was, that some one might claim you; but it faded as the months went by without a word. Father thought it right to advertise, but no one answered. You could not speak, and seemed to remember nothing; the doctors said it was the shock.

"We taught you from the beginning, from your first lisping word; and ever since then you have been my own child, my very own God-sent child. Can you understand that, my darling?"

Jim said no word, and made no movement.

"When you went to school," she continued, "your

father wished to tell you, but I begged him not. I had almost persuaded myself that you were mine in very truth, and he gave in. He would never have told you to-night, but that he has grown feeble of late. I have noticed it in many ways; he is not the man he was, and he did not understand.

"The wrong to you was not in keeping silence, but, having kept silence for so long, to have spoken now. Father did not understand; he thought it could make no difference."

"Make no difference!" said Jim, suddenly. "No difference! Oh, no, only the difference between Heaven and Hell!"

"Why so?" she asked quietly.

"Because I have lost everything I held dear — my love — my name — everything. How can I marry Mildred now?"

"You must tell her, of course; but having told her honestly, it will make no difference to her love. You may be sure of that."

"But how can I, in honour, ask her to share my life, when I don't even know who I am?"

"You are not going to proclaim that upon the housetop," was the shrewd reply. "You will have the same position as you have always had; the same position you had when you won her."

"Oh, no!" interrupted Jim.

"And anyway, you are a gentleman; that is plainly

to be seen on the face of you, — an honest, upright gentleman, as God made you."

"I cannot marry her until I have at least a name to offer her."

"You have a very good name which was given you at your baptism; it is your own." Mrs. Lucas was fighting every inch of the way. "Mildred loves you, and all will be well."

"I will find out the truth," Jim broke out hotly. "There must be some clue, some means of finding out."

"I am afraid not," she said.

"There was a desk, wasn't there? Can I see it? Does it tell you nothing?"

"I will fetch it," she said, rising.

She returned presently with it in her hands, and seated herself as before. It was an old-fashioned box of inlaid rosewood, bound with brass. It opened to a slant. Mrs. Lucas unlocked it.

"I had the key fitted," she explained. "It was empty and broken when it came. The fireman said it was in the room where you were found." She took out a bundle of newspaper cuttings. "These are the accounts of the fire; they are very short; you can read them by and by. There was one piece of writing which I didn't find until a long time after, between the blotting-paper. I said nothing about it, for it seemed unimportant, and also perhaps I dreaded the whole discussion should be renewed. Here it is."

It was a single sheet of thin foreign note-paper, bearing some lines of writing in a fine feminine hand. The ink was faded, but the words were legible.

November 20th, 1880.

MY VERY DEAR HUSBAND, — I must add a few lines to my budget. I have reached London safely, and went to an Hotel, but left at once, as I heard they had a case of smallpox. These lodgings will do very well for two or three days, until we go West. The new nurse is pleasant, and Baby seems already better for the change of air. I think of you always, dear husband; the days of separation are so long. I long to hear from you, but know it is impossible. All these letters will be sent so as to reach you when the . . . breaks.

Good-night.

"I can't read the word before 'breaks'; can you?" said Jim.

"No; I have never been able to make it out. You see, there is nothing that can be called a clue."

"My mother must have written this."

Mrs. Lucas winced. There had been times when jealousy of the unknown woman had eaten into her heart's core; she felt the old wound even now, but she answered steadily: —

"Yes, that must have been written by your mother."

"Was there no mark on my clothes?"

"You had only a flannel night-gown. I have it now; there was no mark."

He unfolded the papers, and read the contents.

The accounts were meagre; the affair had evidently roused no particular interest. It mentioned that through the kindness of a private gentleman, the dead had been interred and the sole survivor provided for. There were three women burnt, presumably the mother, the nurse, and the landlady, Mrs. Williams. The servant slept out. The bodies could not be identified.

"It was nearly twenty years ago," said Mrs. Lucas. "if it was not possible to find out anything then, it will be doubly impossible now."

"I must find out," said Jim, grimly. "All my happiness depends on it. I have lost everything. You don't understand."

The despair in his voice broke down her self-control.

"Oh, Boy, Boy!" she cried, in passionate appeal, "never doubt our love — whatever happens, never doubt our love. We are the same as we always have been, and always will be, Father and I. All our hopes and all our love are centred in you. My dear! my dear! don't turn from us now!"

Her words pierced through the fog which seemed to be clouding Jim's brain. It was true. He knew it. She had given him a mother's love; no mother could have loved more fondly or have been more fondly loved; and she could never change. Here was one piece of solid ground among the chaos. He turned with a quick, boyish gesture, and threw his arm

round her, while from his lips came the word for which her whole heart was hungering.

"Mother!" he cried. "Mother!"

She drew his head down until it rested on her breast.

"My son!" she murmured, with infinite tenderness. "Always my dear, dear son."

The first pale gleams of the dawn were stealing into the room before they rose. Comfort had come to Jim's soul, such comfort as only a mother can give. He felt calm and strengthened.

They had discussed the matter from every side, over and over again, quietly and systematically. He saw his way clearly before him now, and in the distance, the very far distance, gleamed one little ray of hope. He was unaltered in his decision that he must give Mildred back her promise; that he felt bound in honour to do; but in his heart of hearts he knew that love would triumph over difficulty, that some day the clouds would break, and the sun would shine again. How, he did not know; but he would live for that day, in the present darkness.

"Dear Mother, you must go," he said at last tenderly. "I cannot, will not, try to thank you for what you have done for me to-night. Let me help you to your room."

He did so, and she kissed and blessed him solemnly as they parted, for she knew that he was hers,

in very truth he was hers, but with this difference: he was a man now, a boy no longer. And while her whole soul was uplifted with thankfulness that all was well between them, and she rejoiced in the strength of the man; yet, woman-like, she wept a little for the boy whom she adored, and who was gone from her, never to return.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MISSING WORD

"White as a white sail on a dusky sea
When half the horizon's clouded, and half free,"
Fluttering between the dun wave and the sky,
Is hope's last gleam in man's extremity."

—BYRON.

"HAVE you heard from Jim, Mildred?" asked Sir Henry.

It was after dinner the next evening, and they were all seated in the drawing-room.

"No!" said Mildred. "I thought I should have had a telegram. He said that perhaps he might not be able to come until to-morrow."

"You will have a letter in the morning," said Miss Price, consolingly. "Engagements are a great source of income to the Inland Revenue! I'll be bound you wrote to him to-day. Now, didn't you?"

Mildred blushed happily.

"Well! Yes, I did."

"Then it would certainly be a pity if he had come to-day, and missed the letter!" laughed the old lady.

Her merriment was a little forced, but it passed unnoticed. She was racking her brains to find a reason for a certain change which had taken place in Eleanor. It was rather a subtle change, but plainly

visible to her loving eyes; for instead of the new brightness and animation which Eleanor had shown of late, she had relapsed into something akin to her former state of chilly, self-controlled calm. She seemed to be putting a strong restraint upon herself, as if she were determined to act in everything in her usual natural way. If anything had occurred to distress her,—and Miss Price felt sure that this was the case,—she was evidently forcing herself to disregard it. Her friend could not form any idea as to the trouble; she had asked if she felt indisposed, and had received the answer, "Thank you, I am perfectly well," given in such a tone as prohibited further enquiries. Miss Price was not a woman to force confidences, and had perforce to contain her anxiety as best she might.

Eleanor had seemed both surprised and relieved when Mildred had told her of Sir Henry's consent to their engagement. She could not understand his volte-face after his words to her, but that did not prevent her being very thankful at the course events had taken.

Sir Henry and Captain Maitland, who was dining there that night, were indulging in political argument. The radical ideas which the former had held in his young days had been considerably modified by the passage of time; but he laughingly refused to enlist under the banner of any party, and this attitude was the cause of many a hot discussion. The Captain

called himself a staunch Conservative, and was always ready to do battle with any one who could not, or would not, accept his views *en bloc*.

"You want to throw all legislative power into the hands of the masses," he was saying. "It won't do, Trevor; it won't do."

"It is only fair that the larger proportion of the community should have a large share in the management of it," said Sir Henry, good-humouredly.

"Not a bit of it!" was the retort. "They don't know what to do with power when they have got it. They've never been used to it; they weren't intended for it; they don't know what to do with it. Why! my dear fellow! you've only got to look round you. If you were a large employer of labour, you'd be able to tell me how many men, out of, say, six hundred, were fit to wield power over their fellows. Promote a man from the ranks, and he is either weak or a bully."

"History contradicts your statements," argued Sir Henry. "How many leaders of men have been of humble birth and extraction?"

"I grant you there is always the exception that proves the rule," replied the Captain. He was constitutionally unable to acknowledge defeat. "But their number is so small that it would never warrant throwing the country into the hands of the populace. If any are endowed with sufficient brain to rise from

the ruck, let them come to the top. We'll be glad to acknowledge them when they arrive. Oh, no, no! the ambition for personal power, and the love of wielding it, is the curse of England to-day. It breeds a class of agitators."

"I don't think I should mind them having power if they didn't use it in such a disagreeable way," said Miss Price. "But they do like to show off. Only last week, in London, I was hurried down a long flight of steps at an underground station; the train was just coming in, and I had ample time, but just as I got to the bottom, the man shut the door in my face. There was I, caged, the train standing opposite, and the man grinning in triumph! I wouldn't bandy words with him, but when a gentleman beside me said, 'D——,' I turned and thanked him effusively. I really couldn't help it!"

"Insolent!" fumed Captain Maitland, while the others laughed. "There was the petty official exhibiting his power; he had got us, and he knew it."

"He must have been a disagreeable person, but that does not condemn his class," said Sir Henry.

Captain Maitland was bringing reserves to the attack, when the door opened suddenly, and Jim entered. Mildred jumped up with a welcoming cry.

"How did you get here?" "Have you had some dinner?" "Why didn't you send a telegram?" were the questions which greeted him.

"I bicycled from Larnham," Jim said quietly. "I am sorry I did not let you know. I could not get away until this afternoon."

"Well! What did your father say to your good news?" asked Sir Henry.

Jim hesitated. For a moment his eyes went from one to the other, as if seeking for help. Miss Price rose.

"If you will come into the morning room with me, Captain Maitland, we will marshal our arguments so that our concerted attack will rout Sir Henry next time," and they walked to the door.

"No!" said Jim, suddenly. "Please do not go. There is no need. You have been very kind to me, and I should like you to know."

Sir Henry and Eleanor had drawn closer, a deep anxiety to be seen on their faces.

"Tell us, my boy," he said kindly. "What is it?"

"I am not my father's son. I have come to tell you — and to give you back your promise, Mildred," he added, turning to the girl. "I have no name. I do not know who I am."

For a second she looked at him, all her heart in her eyes, then she ran to him, and, throwing her arms round his neck, "Jim!" she said, "you stupid old Jim! As if that could possibly make any difference! Uncle Henry! Aunt Eleanor! Help me to make him understand that it can't make any difference!"

Jim gently released her, and put her away from him.

"Wait until you have heard all about it," he said.

"Come and sit down, dear child," said Eleanor. "Let Jim tell his story in his own way."

She took the girl's hand, and held it in a reassuring clasp, as she drew her down on a sofa.

And Jim began — slowly at first, but gathering courage as he went on. He recounted the story of the fire, and the part Mr. and Mrs. Lucas had played, leaving out nothing. He told them of the desk, and the letter, and of the absolute mystery which surrounded his parentage. No one interrupted him. When he had done, he said: —

"I should like to explain one thing. You may wonder why my father" — he spoke the word distinctly — "told me now, when all my life he has kept silence. He is getting an old man; his powers are a little feeble, and he does not see things clearly. He said it could not make any difference in my life or prospects. He did not understand. My mother had no idea he would speak. She had always begged him never to do so, and had entirely dismissed the matter from her mind. Indeed, I think she had forgotten it! She was as unprepared for it as I was. I should not like you to have an unjust thought towards them." He paused, and Mildred was about to speak, but Sir Henry prevented her, and Jim continued.

"I am, of course, in honour bound to break off my engagement. I cannot ask Mildred to marry me now; you will rightly withdraw your consent. I shall devote myself to the task of finding out who I am — and then I shall come back again."

Mildred rose, in spite of Eleanor's restraining hand.

"Am I not to be considered?" she said quickly. "It is not a question of your asking me to marry you; you have asked me! The thing is done! You are willing to release me; but what if I refuse to be released? And I do refuse! Uncle Henry! please help me!" she cried, with tears in her eyes. "Don't you see — Oh, Jim!" she sobbed, "how can you be so silly?"

Jim stood perfectly erect in the centre of the room — he made no movement to go to her, only his hands clenched and unclenched themselves in his efforts for self-mastery. His eyes were fixed upon Sir Henry. Then Sir Henry said slowly: —

"I am only one guardian; there is Lady Vernon to be considered; but so far as my consent is concerned, I shall not withdraw it. I think Mildred is perfectly right."

In two strides Jim cleared the intervening space, and in a moment had taken her in his arms before them all. Sir Henry deliberately turned round, and poked the fire.

"Bravo!" said Miss Price, softly, rubbing her hands together.

"We haven't seen the letter yet," said Eleanor, suddenly. "We must see that."

"It seems incredible that there is not a clue of some sort," said Captain Maitland.

"There is more inducement to find it now than there was then. I don't suppose that Mrs. Lucas wanted to give up the boy at all."

Presently Jim and Mildred joined the circle round the fire.

"Will you write to Lady Vernon, Sir Henry?" he asked; "or shall I do so?"

"I will write," was the answer.

"Will you tell her that I shall do my very best to find out the truth before we are married? I am determined to do this."

"What steps are you going to take?" asked Captain Maitland. "What is the exact information you have got to go upon?"

"I have no information beyond the date of the fire, and of course the example of my mother's handwriting."

"You have not shown us the letter. May we see it?" asked Sir Henry.

Jim handed it to him. He read it through carefully.

"There is one illegible word in it, but it does not

seem of any great importance," he said, as he handed it back to his wife. "What about the desk? Is there any possibility of a secret hiding-place in it?"

"I don't think so," replied Jim. "It is very simply made, with hardly any fittings. I can, of course, have it examined by an expert. There is a little mark like a star cut on it; it looks as if a child had done it with a knife; but that is no clue. There are no initials, or crest. We must begin by trying the advertisements again, I suppose."

Miss Price read the letter in her turn, and then gave it to the Captain, who carried it to the lamp so as to obtain a better light. The others were listening to Jim, and did not notice that after a few moments he fetched a magnifying-glass from the writing-table, and studied something very carefully. Then he said: —

"You are wrong! There is a clue here, and a very strong one. The word is *ice*."

"Ice!" echoed Sir Henry, in surprise.

"How is that a clue?" asked Jim.

"'*These letters will reach you when the ice breaks.*' This sentence can only have one meaning," continued the Captain. "The man was in the Arctic regions, or possibly the Antarctic, but that is not so likely."

"An Arctic expedition!" cried Mildred.

"Yes!" he returned. "When I went out in 1874, we got our mails at Hammerfest. The letters

for this expedition would naturally have been sent to the first point at which they were expected to touch on their homeward journey, in the hopes of catching them there. Although, of course, your plans are apt to miscarry up there."

"Then," said Jim, and in spite of himself his voice shook a little, "we have only to find out what expedition was there in 1880."

"Yes. I can't remember off-hand, but Markham went for the second time in 1879, and Leigh Smith in 1880. Of course there were others. You could find a list in the library, I should think; and of course the Royal Geographical Society would give you any information."

"It's a clue! A distinct clue! How clever of you to find it," cried Mildred.

"Indeed it is!" said Jim, eagerly. "I am full of hope now."

"Wait a bit," said Sir Henry, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder. "I don't want to throw cold water on your little spark of hope, but we mustn't forget how long ago it is. Many members of these expeditions may be dead. Some never returned at all. However," he added, more cheerfully, "some did, — here's our old friend here to bear witness to that, and we will all do our best to aid you in your search. Stay a few days, at all events, until I have heard from Lady Vernon; and until we have got authentic details of the various expeditions."

"I shall go to town to-morrow, I think," said Captain Maitland. "I have one or two old friends who will be able to help us considerably, men who have kept up their interest and connection with this exploring work."

"It would be awfully good of you," said Jim, gratefully.

"Not a bit of it," said the old man, stoutly. "I mean to help you to worry this out. Will you take a partner in the search?"

"With the best will in the world," replied Jim, heartily. "Your help will put new heart into me."

The Captain took his leave soon after, and Mildred and Jim disappeared.

"They have plenty to say to each other," said Miss Price. "What a curious story it is!"

"Of course, the husband being out of England might be the reason that the advertisements were not answered," returned Sir Henry. "I imagine some of these parties stay away for years, and no doubt, if he ever did return, he could find no trace of his wife and child."

"Dear little Mildred!" said Eleanor; "she was very brave about it."

"Yes!" agreed Miss Price, "she has plenty of good sense. I thoroughly applauded your decision, Sir Henry."

"Thank you," he replied. "It would have been

hard if their happiness had been destroyed suddenly, by something unforeseen and unavoidable."

He looked at his wife as he spoke. The desire to do what would please her had influenced his action; and he was hoping she would express her approval, but he was disappointed. Eleanor rose.

"I think it is time to say good-night," she said rather stiffly. "I will go and call Mildred."

Sir Henry's two letters to Lady Vernon had followed so soon the one after the other, that he received one reply to them both, and that reply came as a blow to Mildred's often repeated assertion that their marriage might still take place in July, as had been originally intended. For Lady Vernon's attitude towards her wards was apparently very different to what it had been when they were alone and friendless. She had been prepared with equanimity to see Mildred earning her own living then, but now that they had been virtually adopted by Sir Henry and Lady Trevor, they had assumed a new importance in her eyes. So much was evident from the tone of her epistle, for she stated plainly that she was at a loss to understand how Sir Henry could think so lightly of his responsibility as guardian as to give his consent to Mildred's engagement with a young man who, by his own showing, was nobody at all. His birth was unknown, therefore he might

be, and probably was, of humble parentage, and quite unsuitable to be for one moment considered as an eligible suitor. She hoped Sir Henry would see the advisability of discontinuing the acquaintance, and make it clear to the young man that any further attentions on his part would be considered an impertinence. She suggested that Mildred should come to London, where she proposed to introduce her into society which would enable her to find a husband for her. Some one suitable in birth and fortune to Mildred's beauty and position!

The whole letter was pompous to the point of vulgarity, and the possibility of Mildred's affections being already given to this 'nobody' was quite ignored.

Mildred had cheered Jim in her pretty, hopeful way, and even now would not acknowledge this to be a crushing blow.

"It only means waiting, dearest," she said. "In a little over two years I shall be of age, and can do what I choose. Uncle Henry says we must not be engaged; but that does not matter, because we shall write to each other, and love each other, and long before that you will have found out all about everything."

And what could Jim do, with her arms round him, and her cheek against his, but assure her of his undying devotion, which neither time nor separation could alter?

Sir Henry had, man-like, been irritated at the idea of Lady Vernon presuming to hint that his interpretation of Duty was not all that it ought to be, and had stoutly declined to follow her instructions.

"I repeat," he said, "I do not withdraw my consent; but under the circumstances there can be no formal engagement. I shall be pleased to see Jim, whenever he cares to come; and if letters will help you both to get over a period of waiting, I shall say nothing to prevent your writing as much as you like. My affection for Jim remains the same."

And now all their attention was turned to the great problem of how to discover the secret which circumstances had hidden so carefully for so long. Captain Maitland and Jim had agreed to make London their headquarters, for a time at least. It was considered advisable to be on the spot in order to consult records and interview authorities.

"We must not expect events to march quickly," said the Captain to Eleanor. "The search will take time, of course. I have heard from my friend, Gervase, who is a great man on Polar exploration. He will have a list of names ready for us when we arrive in London."

"I don't know what Jim would have done without you," she returned gratefully. "I don't know how to thank you."

"I will do my best for the lad," he said heartily.

"I want to see the young people happy if it is possible."

"Do you know," said Eleanor, gently, "for a moment I half hoped that you might be the man we were seeking!"

He smiled.

"Ah! your search would have been quickly ended if that had been the case. No! I had a son once — but I lost him — and his mother. He would have been about Jim's age now. I think that is why I am so fond of the boy. My life's romance was very short, but I have not lost the memory."

He spoke with deep feeling, and Eleanor laid her hand on his arm.

"Forgive me," she said; "I did not know."

"How should you, dear lady? That's all right. And now, to turn from the past to the present. Our course is quite clear. It is slow and sure does it — slow and sure!"

The old man was entirely hopeful, and the others could not but be infected by his cheerfulness; and finally he and Jim started off in good spirits to commence their search. How long would it take, and what would be the result? No one could tell.

Miss Price took her departure soon after, with a heavy heart. Since the evening of Mildred's engagement she had had no intimate conversation with

Eleanor, and she was forced to leave her without ascertaining the cause of her altered demeanour.

And so life settled down again much in its old lines at 'Trevor Lordship'; outwardly, at least, for the inward changes were hardly apparent on the surface. Mildred was learning that hardest of all woman's lessons, 'how to wait,' and Eleanor was doing her best to piece together the broken fragments of a dream.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROSE FADES

"Mais, elle était du monde ou les plus belles choses
Ont le pire destin,
Et Rose, elle a vecu ce que vives les roses —
L'espace d'un matin !"
— FRANÇOIS DE MALHERBE.

THE words which Sir Henry had spoken had, so far as Eleanor could see, given her no choice but to believe that he regretted his marriage. This must of course mean that he had no love for her; and yet, as the summer came, and the days lengthened in all their splendour and sunshine, she knew that her own love was only growing stronger. And little by little, there grew with it a tiny flower of hope; hope that, as all great things influence their surroundings, so the very strength of her affection would compel his in response. At the moment, at all events, she was content to wait.

Sometimes she reflected with incredulity that it was only a year, or even less, since she had deplored the lack of human interest, so full of it were her days now. She had grown to lavish on the invalid at 'Rooks' Nest' a very tender and deep affection. Her companionship had done much for the girl, and, indeed, the gain had been mutual, for their long talks

and intimate discussions had greatly assisted in Eleanor's awakening. Her mind had been broadened, her intelligence roused, by the constant contact with one who, whatever her limitations, had certainly lived her short life to its uttermost.

And, in return, her friendship was a stimulus to Constance's feeble vitality, and the new interest had, for a time at least, seemed to strengthen her frail hold on life. Mrs. Mollison and Eleanor, however, who watched her with the eyes of love, could not fail to notice that the sands of life were surely running down.

And during all these months their conversation had never once touched upon the forbidden topic. Constance's past was still a sealed book to Eleanor, who, in her turn, talked of literature, politics, history, any possible subject rather than her life, her doings, and her friends. She felt that if she gave her confidence, it would seem as if she were demanding confidence in return.

But one afternoon, with her mind full of Mildred's affair, she found herself mentioning it before she was aware that she had broken through her rule. And Constance was most interested, and asked many questions.

"How old is she? What is she like? How long have they known each other?"

"They have known each other for five or six years,

ever since they were children, in fact, for they are not very much more now. She is eighteen, and Jim is, I believe, twenty-two or three."

"That isn't so very young," said Constance, slowly. "I was only seventeen." Then she bit her lip, as if the words had escaped her unthinkingly. Eleanor did not seem to notice.

"And I was thirty-three," she said, smiling. "There is a difference! But, after all, they will grow old together; they will not waste their youth."

"Youth is only a term," replied Constance. "Some people's youth lasts all their lives, and others — doesn't last more than a few months. How good you are!" she said suddenly. "You have never asked me any questions — you know nothing about me! and yet look what you are to me."

"I don't want to know anything," declared Eleanor, stoutly.

"No!" said the girl, slowly. Then she stooped forward and kissed her. "Dear," she said, "if there could be anything that would hold me here, it would be you; but even you can't do that. And I don't think you would wish to if you could. It won't be very long now. I know that. No! hush" (as Eleanor tried to speak); "and I want to tell you something — a little."

"Don't, dearest!" said Eleanor. "I don't want to know."

"Ah! but you must listen, and afterwards you shall know everything. It is due to you, my friend. Listen! My father was St. John Fortescue, and my mother died when I was fifteen. We were never very well off, but after that, my father sold our little home in Cheshire,—he couldn't live there without my mother,—and we went abroad. When I was just seventeen, we were at Wiesbaden, and my father became very ill. He lived two months, and two days after his funeral I married a man who had been very kind to me during his illness."

She paused, as if desirous of choosing her words, and then continued:—

"The end came four months later, and Nannie came and took me away to her home in Scotland. She was my nurse, you know. It has been very hard on poor Nannie. My baby died, and after a while they said I couldn't live in Scotland, so we came here. That is three years ago—And that is all!" she finished, with a wan smile.

What had been the end? Not death, surely not kindly death, with his mantle of forgiveness. But something infinitely harder to bear! Eleanor kissed her in silence, and presently she continued:—

"I think it was my baby's death that broke my heart. If I had had her, I should have had something to care for; but she only lived a month. But after all, it was best for her, and I shall see her

soon — very soon now. Don't cry!" as the tears rose in Eleanor's eyes. "Don't you see there is nothing to cry for now? It is all joy now. And looking back from where I stand to-day, I see the past so clearly, and somehow it was worth while! 'I should live the same life over if I had to live again,' because whatever happens, afterwards, whatever breaks the dream, one has the memory, and the memory is better, — oh! so far better than nothing. It is love that makes everything possible except forgetfulness. And who wants to forget? Not I! The memory is my delight. You will know what I mean, Eleanor, when you have a child. You will know how it repays all, and makes everything worth while. To carry love under your heart, and in your arms! —"

She lay back on her pillows, and Eleanor rose quickly.

"You mustn't talk any more, dear child. It is too much for you." She poured out a dose of medicine, and gave it to her. "Lie still, dear one!"

After a while Constance recovered a little.

"I did not know I had so much energy!" she smiled, faintly. "But I feel I must speak to-day. We may not have another opportunity. Dear Eleanor! you will remember, won't you, that if you have love, you must guard it, and cherish it, and hold it fast. Neither trouble, nor sorrow, nor separation, nor coldness can take it from you; even if it

is only a memory, it is riches. You are troubled now, I know, I can see; but it will pass. All will come right. I don't know how I know it, but I do know it — and when it does, you will think of me, won't you?"

Eleanor could only hold her closely in speechless tenderness.

They parted soon after, for the last time, as it proved. For the next morning, very early, Nannie found her bairn lying asleep as she had left her but a few short hours before, but with the light of the everlasting love on her cold little face.

Later in the day, as Eleanor sat holding the faithful woman's hand in deepest sympathy, she heard the whole tragic story, just as Constance had told it, but with added details.

"I came to London when she wrote me her babe was coming," said Mrs. Mollison, brokenly. "She was much alone, although he came sometimes. She never guessed, but I felt there was something wrong. And one fine day we knew. I'd have cut off my right hand sooner, but she found it out through me. I had been out to do some shopping, and I brought her home a picture paper, thinking it would cheer her. I gave it to her without looking at it, and presently I heard a cry. Ma'am, dear, I can never forget it! There was his picture, and a bit of print-

ing about him; 'twas something to do with Parliament, I think; and they gave a bit of his life. He was married — had been married for years, and it mentioned who his wife was, and how they had come to London. It was easily proved, too, for I went to the address, and saw them at the door. Aye! and he saw me too, though I never stayed a moment, nor spoke a word. I took my bairn straight to my home in bonny Scotland, and there I will take her again, me and my man, to lie with her babe in the auld kirkyard. Don't ask me his name, m' lady, for I told her I'd never name him, and I never will."

"Did he ever try to find her?" asked Eleanor, gently.

"He would never have found her," said the woman, grimly. "But I don't think he'd have tried. He'd tired of her, you see."

Only that! — a man's pastime — and a woman's life. Well, it was finished now, and the rest was in the hands of God!

A few days after, the house was closed, only to be let later to a couple with a sturdy family, whose laughter echoed through the rooms where tragedy had brooded so long — but the blank in Eleanor's life was not so soon filled. The fragrance of the gentle soul lingered like the essence of the rose leaves after the flower is dead.

CHAPTER XIX

MINNIE COMES AND GOES

"Speech is but broken light upon the depth
Of the unspoken."

—GEORGE ELIOT.

"I REALLY felt I couldn't stand London another minute. I simply had to get away," said Minnie, as she threw off her cloak, and sank down on a sofa. "I hope you did not mind me telegraphing?"

"Of course not," replied Eleanor. "It's so nice to have you."

"I hope nothing is wrong?" asked Sir Henry.

"Oh, nothing! I was only hopelessly tired."

"I thought perhaps you might have had bad news of your husband," continued her brother. "How is he?"

"Oh, Hugh's all right," said Minnie; and then after a slight pause, she added, "he's coming home."

"How glad you must be!" said Eleanor. "Is the regiment coming, or has he got leave?"

"He has got leave. He is rather seedy, nothing much; he said he would be home some time in the autumn."

Minnie spoke with rather elaborate carelessness, or so it struck Eleanor.

"How did you leave London?" asked Sir Henry.

"Hopeless!" replied Minnie, wearily. "It's been a horrid season, and I shall be thankful when it is over. Every one is thoroughly dull. I haven't even heard a good story for months. I hate the sight of the place, and wish I might never see it again."

"Was this Minnie?" thought Eleanor, in surprise! Something must be seriously wrong to put the world thus out of joint for Minnie, and make her leave town when the season was at its height. But she made no comment.

"How is Mrs. Trevor?" she asked.

"Mamma is quite well, but she worries me. She keeps on saying I look ill, which is only another way of telling a person they look ugly. I suppose it's the truth, because no less than four people told me the same thing yesterday. Heaven save me from candid friends!"

"Well, stay here and have a good rest," said Sir Henry; "only I'm afraid that, as far as dulness goes, you'll find it worse here."

"I met Jim Lucas in Bond Street, a day or two ago," said Minnie, presently.

"Mildred will be interested. How was he?"

"Oh, quite cheerful. He said he had had four different interviews this week; all useless! He was rather funny about the last one. He and Captain Maitland

went to see an old lady who turned them out of the house. She seemed to consider they were casting aspersions on the character of her late husband. He said they tried in vain to get her to answer a few questions. But he seemed quite confident that they would find the right person presently."

Roger Bolding came in a little later with Joan and Mildred, and greeted Minnie with cheerful surprise.

"How did you manage to tear yourself away from the gay city?" he asked her.

"It isn't gay!" she replied, rather pettishly. "It's a dull hole, and fearfully depressing."

"Is the shadow of Kruger's top hat veiling the sun of society?" he asked lightly. "We even feel it here! Nothing will persuade your brother that the country isn't going to be plunged in bloody warfare!"

"Have you read your paper to-day?" put in Sir Henry, gravely. "You were so certain that this conference was going to straighten things out, and now Milner has had to leave Bloomfontein, having achieved nothing!"

"Oh, it's all bluff. If we stand firm, they'll climb down."

"Half the world says there will be war, and the other half ridicules the idea," said Minnie.

"I don't ridicule it exactly," replied Bolding. "But I don't believe it will come. I rather wish it would. I should like to see our chaps knock those

Dutch fellows into fits. It would be over in a fortnight. Teach them a jolly good lesson!"

"You're wrong, my dear fellow, you're wrong!" declared Sir Henry. "If it comes to war, as personally I am afraid it will, it won't be over in a fortnight, nor yet in six months. And it won't be such a simple matter for us as you imagine."

"Oh! do stop, Henry," cried Minnie; "and talk of something more cheerful. Of course there won't be war. It's absurd to suggest such a thing. Will there, Monsieur Alphonse Daudet?"

Alphonse sat up, and looked unutterably wise, but, like wiser folk than he, volunteered no opinion.

"Please don't feed him any more, Aunt Minnie," said Joan. "He's been visiting the butcher, and had a lot of scraps. Mr. Green does spoil him so. We didn't see Lavender, Aunt Eleanor; she had gone to Bessie, who has got a bran-new baby! I do hope we shall see it soon."

"Mrs. Giles was looking after the shop," said Mildred. "She heard Bessie was going on all right."

"Poor Bessie!" said Eleanor, softly.

"I did have such fun this morning," cried Joan, suddenly. "I got such a rise out of Ma'mselle! Oh! she did get baity!"

"Baity!" repeated Eleanor. "Where in the world did you get that expression, and what does it mean?"

"Same as shirty," explained Joan. "Waxy, you

know. Well, she's fearfully keen on French history, and is always bragging and boasting about it, until it's perfectly sickening. She gave us a lesson to write, and the first question was, 'Who was Joan of Arc?' So I put 'Mrs. Noah!' You should have seen her face when I showed it up!"

"Oh, Joan! it was naughty," said Eleanor and Mildred together.

"Well! what is the use of learning all about a lot of people who have been dead for hundreds of years? They can't be any possible use to me! Now, if she would teach about present-day people who really did something, there would be some sense in it. Joan of Arc was a silly girl who went and got burnt, and there was an end of her. Who wants to remember her?"

"The crime of non-success," said Bolding. "Where do you get your worldly wisdom, Joan?"

"Who would you like to learn about, Joan?" asked Sir Henry.

"Oh! I know lots of people! Lord Roberts, and Nelson, and Queen Victoria, and Oom Paul."

"Shades of the top hat, even here," ejaculated Bolding.

"You see what I mean, Uncle Henry, don't you?" asked Joan, anxiously. "Dead people aren't half so important and interesting as live ones, are they?"

"They are certainly not so important at the mo-

ment," he replied, laughing. "But I am bound to confess that, personally, I find them sometimes more interesting. Only sometimes."

Minnie cheered up after dinner, and was more her usual self during the evening; but as they walked up to bed, she put her arm through Eleanor's, and drew her into her room.

"Stay with me for a little," she said wearily. "I hate being alone."

"You are thoroughly tired out," said Eleanor, kindly. "Let me help you into bed. You'll be much better after a night's rest."

"I didn't bring Walker; I left her to look after Mamma."

"Well, let me help you. You must get to sleep as quickly as you can."

But Minnie, when her hair was loosened, and she was wrapped in a comfortable gown, declared she was not sleepy. She was sure she couldn't sleep if she did go to bed — and then, suddenly, she flung herself face downwards on the sofa, and burst into a flood of tears.

Eleanor felt really alarmed. Minnie in tears! It was unbelievable. But she soothed her as best she might until the worst of the storm was over. She had grown very fond of her gay little sister-in-law, and somehow felt a little indignant that life should have shown its shadow side to one so obviously in-

tended only for the sunshine. It seemed an error of judgment on the part of the fates who hold the strings to which we puppets dance, to have assigned Minnie a tragedy rôle, when she was only suited for the lightest comedy. And this was exactly what Minnie felt herself!

"Dear Minnie, do tell me what is the matter," Eleanor said at last. "I want to help you, and perhaps I can if you will only tell me what is worrying you."

But Minnie made no reply, except a fresh burst of tears. Eleanor tried severity.

"Now, Minnie," she said firmly, "stop crying at once, and tell me all about it. I can't do anything when I haven't the vaguest idea what is the matter."

For a moment she thought her policy had succeeded, for Minnie sat up, and dried her eyes with a wisp of sodden lace handkerchief. She opened her lips to speak, but no words came. Eleanor felt hopeless.

"It's no use trying to talk any more to-night," she said at last. "Perhaps, after all, you are worrying yourself about nothing. Your husband will be home soon, and then everything will be all right." She spoke consolingly.

For a second, a gleam of honest fright shot through Minnie's childish blue eyes; then she rose.

"I'm a fool!" she said, in rather a hard voice. "A silly fool! You're a dear, kind thing. Don't

trouble about me. I'm tired, that's all. I shall be all right in the morning."

And in this unsatisfactory frame of mind, Eleanor was forced to leave her.

The next day was Eleanor's birthday. She remembered it when she was dressing, as a fact only important in that it recalled to her that the years were passing. It was not a pleasant reflection. She would gladly have arrested time, had it been possible. She felt she could ill spare it, for every empty day now, meant one more gone beyond recall, one less to live when she had gained her heart's desire. She refused to acknowledge to herself that her hope was slowly growing faint and cold. It seemed impossible to break through the wall of habitual routine which stood between her and her husband. Sir Henry had certainly joined more in their daily doings, of late; but she seldom had opportunity for private conversation with him, and if she had, it was occupied with the small affairs of business or household management which needed discussion. She longed to be alone with him more; but he had never again asked her to assist him with his work, and she was too shy to venture into his library uninvited.

Sometimes she found herself wishing that Mildred and Joan, and Roger Bolding, and a few other intimates of their family circle, were at the world's end;

and then she took herself to task for the selfishness of the thought.

It may have been the effect of Minnie's emotion on the previous evening that depressed her this morning, or it may have been that the brilliant sunshine and the glad song of the birds were at variance with the chill she felt at her heart; anyhow, she was sensible of being a little out of tune with her surroundings, as she descended the stairs, and entered the sunny dining-room.

Mildred and Joan flew to her with good wishes, and each had a little present for her. She thanked them fondly, wondering all the while if her husband would remember, and then telling herself that the thought was ridiculous. In all probability he did not even know of the anniversary.

But after a few minutes the door opened, and Sir Henry walked in.

"I have come to offer my congratulations. Many happy returns of the day! Here is a small offering with my respectful compliments!"

In spite of his laughing manner, there was something in his tone which brought a flush to Eleanor's cheek. She took the packet, and, opening it, found a really beautiful watch bracelet; a thing which she had repeatedly expressed a desire to possess. So he had not only remembered, but had spent time and trouble on obtaining the very thing which she most desired. The

thought was so delightful that she found it hard to control her voice sufficiently to thank him. Sir Henry stepped closer to her.

"I should like to wish that it will only count happy hours for you," he said gently.

Then Joan broke in excitedly.

"Oh, I do hope you are pleased," she cried. "I said it was what you wanted, and we were so dreadfully afraid it wouldn't come in time."

A cloud blotted out Eleanor's new-found joy. So it wasn't his own idea at all! He would never have thought of it if it hadn't been for the child.

"Thank you very much indeed," she said in a voice which tried to be natural, and only succeeded in being cold. She did not look at her husband as she took off the bracelet, and laid it back in its case. "How clever of you, Joan, to find out just what I wanted."

Mildred, who was looking at Sir Henry, saw a curious expression pass over his face; then he murmured something about being busy this morning, and left the room.

"Don't you like it?" asked Joan, sorrowfully, after a moment of rather awkward silence. "Oh, I did think you would like it! Won't you put it on?"

"Indeed, I like it very much," Eleanor said lightly. "And I will certainly put it on, only it really seems too beautiful for daily use. Ah! here is Minnie."

Minnie declared herself perfectly rested, and as fit as possible, as she kissed Eleanor affectionately.

"I must have been tired last night," she said apologetically. — "Oh, what a heavenly morning!"

"Here's a letter for you, Minnie," said Mildred.

"I did hope I was out of reach of letters for one day at least!"

A long letter from Miss Price claimed Eleanor's attention, so she failed to notice that Minnie's face grew curiously white as she read. Then she folded the paper again without a word, and made a silent pretence at breakfasting.

"Do have something more," said Mildred presently. "You have eaten nothing!"

"I'm not hungry!"

All the weariness of the previous evening had returned to Minnie's voice; and no sooner was the meal over, and they rose from the table, than she said: —

"Oh, Eleanor, I'm sorry, but I find I must get back to town to-day."

"To-day!" cried Eleanor, in surprise. "Oh, surely not! I am sure you had much better stay a few days quietly here. It isn't worth while to come all this way for one night!" They walked to the morning room, and she continued: "Dear Minnie, do tell me what is troubling you. Have you had bad news? Does your mother want you back again?"

"No! I haven't heard from Mamma — but I must go. It's important — business."

"Won't it keep a few days?"

"I must go to-day," said Minnie, obstinately, and, mystified as Eleanor felt, she could do nothing more.

But just as the carriage drove round to take her to the station, an hour or two later, Minnie turned and kissed her impulsively.

"Thank you, dear old thing! I'm sorry to be such a trouble."

"Do let me help you," Eleanor said again. "I am sure there is something wrong."

"Perhaps there is," was Minnie's answer. "But I think I can manage it myself. If I can't — perhaps I will ask you."

So, much to Sir Henry's surprise, when luncheon time came, Minnie had departed.

"I can't think why she came at all. I never knew any one so erratic. Only last night she expressed her intention of staying some days. Did she give any reason for going?"

"She said something about important business," replied his wife.

Sir Henry laughed good-humouredly.

"What in the world has Minnie got to do with business? — What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"We are going over to Larnham, to tea with Mrs. Wickham," Eleanor answered. "They have a tennis party."

"Why don't you come, Uncle Henry?" said Mildred. "Leave your work for once."

"I don't think I could face it! I haven't played tennis for years. No, I'll be industrious instead," he added, after a pause during which he waited for his wife to speak. "It is wrong to be tempted to idleness by this perfect weather."

Eleanor wished to suggest staying at home with him; but the sense of the morning's disappointment was still strong, and the words did not come easily. It was the first time he had suggested the possibility of laying aside his work to join them; a very little encouragement, and he would have done so. Mildred remarked on this later with some surprise, but Eleanor, who had deeply regretted her silence, did not reply.

CHAPTER XX

DARK DAYS

"Oh! dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon."
—Samson Agonistes.

The glorious summer days contained no hint of brightness for old Mrs. Lucas, for things were going badly with her boy. He was living in rooms with Captain Maitland, and, although the old lady recognized the necessity for this, it did not cease to trouble her. Jim in sorrow was bad enough, but Jim in sorrow, and away from her, was hard to bear. Her husband had failed rapidly since the evening of his memorable conversation with Jim. His attitude of mind was that of a child, who is blamed for some entirely unintentional fault; he realized that he was in some measure blamed for the present state of affairs, but failed to understand why. He would sit for hour after hour in his library, his head sunk upon his breast, lost in gloomy reflection.

Mrs. Lucas did her best to rouse him, but any conversation on the subject was invariably brought to a conclusion by the old man's often repeated cry: —

"It can't make any difference! All I have will be

his! I can't understand what all this pother is about!"

It seemed impossible to explain, so Mrs. Lucas was obliged to avoid the topic. For the first time in her life, the matter nearest her heart could not be shared with "Father." She followed every detail of Jim's search with the keenest interest. He did not forget her; he wrote constantly and fully, but her fond eyes could read between the lines, and there she saw plainly the signs of the heart-sickness born of hope deferred.

The months were slipping by, and, what was worse, the seekers were getting to the end of the information upon which they based their researches. Only two more names remained upon their list, only two more people to hunt up, as likely to be able to help them. When this was done, if these two people failed, or were ignorant or uninterested, they were at the end of their resources, pulled up in a cul-de-sac from which there seemed, so far as they could see, no possible outlet. They had consulted every authority, tapped every possible source of information. After the names on the list, they could hear of no one likely to be able to help them.

At the moment, they were waiting in enforced idleness, owing to a delay in obtaining the addresses of these last two men.

All this Jim had written in his last letter, and

she was longing to hear more; schooling herself to patience as best she might. She had not Mildred's buoyant hope to help her, for she told herself over and over again that Jim was attempting the impossible. Was the secret of twenty years ago to be suddenly disclosed at Jim's call? How could it be? But in spite of this conviction, she never said a word to dissuade him, and more than that, did all she could to help him. Time enough for him to know that his quest was vain when it failed; as fail it must, alas!

So she ordered every book that she could hear of on the subject, and she waded through them, in search of she knew not what! A name she did not know! Did she expect to find the description of a man who sailed away in 1879, or thereabouts, leaving his wife and the most beautiful boy in the world behind him? Hardly! But the fact remains that she toiled through the heavy volumes, jotting down every name mentioned, and any date which seemed important, and posting the lists off to Jim with unfailing regularity. They were not much use — only once did she send a name with which Jim and Captain Maitland were not already familiar; but she felt she was doing something!

But it took time. She couldn't get through the books very fast. They were dull reading, most of them, and the hot summer days were very trying.

The afternoons which began in serious attention to the business in hand often ended in placid slumber. The volume would slip from the old lady's knee to the ground, her spectacles from her nose to her lap, and her mind would drift away into a region of dreamless peace, where icefields and dangers had no being, and even sorrow was unknown. She would wake with a start, resume the book and the glasses, and begin again with honest effort; with the same result.

This afternoon, however, her attention did not wander. If she could only send Jim a few more names before these last interviews were over, it would give him something to go on with, and she read and compared with feverish industry. She must consult so many previous lists; it would never do to send Jim the same name twice over.

Meanwhile, in a small, close room in London sat Captain Maitland. The blinds were drawn down, but the pitiless sun seemed to laugh at such feeble defences, and to penetrate into every corner. Outside, the very street itself seemed to flicker in the heat haze. The horses trotted dejectedly, the few pedestrians slouched wearily. The heat was overwhelming, no coolness anywhere. Inside the room a blue-bottle buzzed irritatingly. Its activity only seemed to emphasize the prevailing lethargy which hung over everything.

Captain Maitland sat erect in an armchair, his hands clasped upon the arms; every now and then he would raise his handkerchief, and mop the heat from his forehead, and then relapse again into immobility. Only his lips moved from time to time; hardly forming words, but with a pathetic movement beyond his control. His eyes were clear and grave. The tropical weather was sapping all his vitality; unused as he was to cities, it affected him far more than it would a Londoner; but he would not acknowledge even to fatigue.

Presently there was a sound of a step on the stairs. The captain raised his head, alert in a moment, but shook it slightly as he noticed the step was slow and languid; not swift and young as he had hoped it might be.

"Well!" he said, rising, as Jim entered. "Have you got the addresses?"

Jim flung his straw hat on the table, and, walking to the sideboard, mixed himself a drink.

"Yes!" he said, with a curt laugh; "3567 Kensal Green Cemetery!"

"Dead!" ejaculated the Captain.

"Dead!" echoed the younger man.

"And the other?"

"Alipur, Elm Road, Putney."

"Oh, that's better. That's one, at any rate," said the Captain, briskly. Then, laying his hand on Jim's

shoulder, "Don't despair, dear lad," he added kindly. "Who knows, the luck may be with us yet! Wait until it's a little cooler, and then we'll be off."

Jim dropped his head on his hands for a few moments, and then raised a wan, white face. The last few months had aged him double the number of years.

"I'm very near chucking it," he said huskily.

"Oh, dear, no!" was the cheerful rejoinder. "The weather's a trifle trying, I confess — but give in? not a bit of it, my boy! I'm not ready for that for many a long day! I tell you what we'll do; we'll go along to Putney this evening, and who knows but that we may happen on the man we're hunting for. If not, we'll go away for a bit, and make more plans. Somewhere out of this furnace. A week in a cool, shady place will put new heart into us! I want to see the green trees, and hear the rooks calling."

"I shan't go to 'Trevor Lordship.' I can't face Mildred with failure."

"There's no failure to be faced yet," retorted the Captain, sturdily. "But never mind, we won't go to 'Trevor,' then. Let's go down the river somewhere for a week, and gain strength for new efforts."

Jim sat on, in gloomy silence, until, about an hour later, the Captain rose.

"Come on, my boy, we'll have another shot. Heaven send we meet no more women! Jove! we

raised a hornets' nest about our ears last time! I never saw such a virago!"

Jim smiled at the recollection. Then he drew himself up with some of his old boyish fun, and, putting on an exaggeratedly pompous manner, he declaimed in staccato tones: —

"I would have you to know, gentlemen, that my late husband was a man of the highest honour! He had no wife but me, and I certainly never had a child! I bid you good-morning!"

Then they both had a good laugh, and felt better.

The stairway was dark and fairly cool, but the heat rose to meet them like a solid wall as they emerged upon the street.

"The top of a 'bus, I think," gasped the Captain, unfurling a huge linen umbrella. "We may get a breath of air there."

They crawled along through the baking and almost deserted streets, odorous with the pungent smell of hot wood pavement, until they reached Putney Bridge. Here they alighted, and, after making various enquiries, found themselves in Elm Road; a locality of staring red villas. Passing these, they came upon one or two houses of an older type, and on the gate of one of these was clearly printed "Alipur."

The door was opened by an elderly maid servant, who invited them to enter. "Mr. Wheeler was at

home," she said; "would they please to walk in." They did so, and found themselves in a low, cool room, looking out on a shady garden.

"Ah! this is better," said Captain Maitland, gratefully. "A pleasant change from outside."

A minute later, a man entered, and greeted them cordially. He was short, and rather stout, with a cheerful cast of countenance, and a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Very pleased to see you, gentlemen," he said heartily. "Come into the garden; it's cooler there. I've been in the tropics half my life, but have never been hotter in the past, and humbly trust I shan't be in the future! DRINKS!!" he roared, in a stentorian voice, as they left the house.

The elderly maid looked out of a door at the other end of the corridor, and nodded. She was accustomed to his tone, it would seem, for she showed no surprise, and appeared presently, bearing a tray of various liquids, syphons, and an ice bowl, which tinkled seductively.

"I suppose you've come for something!" said Mr. Wheeler, chuckling. "Everybody wants something in this world; paupers to prime ministers, all alike! grab! grab! grab! But don't talk about it till you've had a drink. Here, young man, what'll you take? You look a bit crocked up. You haven't sampled hot weather in Calcutta as often as I have, I'll be bound.

Not but what this is worse. You could lambast the punkah coolie there if you felt too sultry!"

"We came to you for a little information," began Captain Maitland, pleasantly.

"If I've got it, you shall have it," said Mr. Wheeler, jovially, winking at Jim. "No charge made! Good advice and information free to all."

"You have been, I think, interested in Arctic exploration?"

"Thunder and lightning! Not a bit of it!" was the astonishing reply. "You've come to the wrong shop, sir! Never could abide the cold, and am only interested in ice when it's in a tumbler!"

"You are Mr. J. H. Wheeler?" asked Jim.

"James Herbert Wheeler, late Indian Civil Service. Son of one Thomas Wheeler, born at Long Stratton in the County of Norfolk, age sixty-one, weight 14 stone 6. Anything else?" he enquired pleasantly.

The Captain consulted a note-book.

"I am afraid we have made a mistake," he said. "We are seeking a Mr. J. H. Wheeler, who, as I understand, joined an Arctic expedition in 1880."

"Ah! I have it," exclaimed their host, slapping his knee. "John Henry Wheeler, born September, 1847, died October, 1887. My brother, sir."

"And he is dead?" asked Jim.

"Dead as a door nail these ten years or more," was the cheerful reply. "Good fellow, John Henry, but

a bit too scientific for me! What did you want with him?"

"My young friend, here, has reason to believe that his father took part in an expedition between the years 1879 and 1883, and we hoped your brother might have been able to assist us."

"What was your father's name?"

Jim gave a short account of his circumstances, and the search on which they were engaged.

"Oh! want a father, do you? Well, you may take it from me it wasn't old John Henry. Couldn't abide women — never spoke to one in his life. And he'd have told me! We lived together five years before he died, and we were very good friends. But it might have been a shipmate of his, of course."

"Is there any record of his journeys?" asked Captain Maitland.

"Oh, yes, bless me, of course there is! You shall have it — I'll get it," and he rose and went into the house.

"We may perhaps find some fresh names," said the Captain, trying to speak hopefully, as Jim sat miserably silent. He had built so much on this last interview bringing them luck.

"Here are the diaries, my dear sir!" vociferated Mr. Wheeler, as he returned. "Four of 'em, chock full of writing. Take 'em with you, and let me have 'em back when you're done with 'em. Ever been in India, sir?"

"No," replied Captain Maitland, absently.

Then his interlocutor started off at a tangent.

"Ah! great country, India, but spoilt since the good old days of John Company. Those were the days for making fortunes. Why, my father, sir, he had a fleet of ships that traded for old John Company all through the Islands, and the money rolled in, positively rolled in! But things are altered now. Very polite to the wily native nowadays — educate him — dress him — flatter him — and what will be the result? It'll be the Mutiny over again, my dear sir, only ten times worse, if possible. Have another drink, sir, have another drink!"

They left the garrulous old man at last, standing at his gate, and still shouting after them, as they walked away homewards. Not a word was spoken on their return journey, and later in the evening they sat, still in silence, each perusing different volumes of the diary. Occasionally they made a note, or referred to a note-book, but no word was spoken. They each examined two volumes, and the clock of a neighbouring church was striking the hour of midnight before they had finished the task.

"No luck, my boy!" said the Captain, sadly.

"None at all," agreed Jim, as he swung himself round to the table, wearily, and rested his head on his folded arms.

"Don't give in, dear lad! Don't give in," urged

the old man, kindly. "We haven't got to the bottom of it yet, but we shall; I'm sure we shall. We'll go away to-morrow and get cool, and start afresh next week."

He looked at the lad anxiously as he spoke, but for a while there was no answer.

Suddenly, Jim raised himself, and sprang to his feet.

"I'll be shot if I give it up!" he cried. "I'll be damned if I do!"

"Hear, hear!" said his companion, softly. "Now come on to bed."

CHAPTER XXI

A VISIT TO LONDON

"For half the evil on earth is invented
By vain pretty women with nothing to do,
But to keep themselves manicured, powdered, and scented,
And to seek for sensations amusing and new."
—ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

IF the weeks that had passed had been hard for Jim, experience taught him that fate held others in the future which were harder still. It had been bad enough while, even if there had not been success, there had at least been action; but now came a period of enforced inaction, when he could do nothing but sit with folded hands, eating his heart out with disappointment and longing. The week for which he and Captain Maitland had originally left London had lengthened more and more. While there was no possible clue to follow, the Captain judged it better to stay where change of scene oiled the clogged wheels of time, and relieved, if ever so slightly, the pressure of their heavy thoughts. For a while this seemed to serve the purpose; then Jim became restless and mutinous, and they returned to London.

August and part of September had dragged out

their weary days. A cloud hung, not only over this circle of friends whose happiness seemed buried with a secret in the past, but over the whole of England. For the clouds of war, which had been massing on the horizon, were just now drawing nearer and nearer, ever more threatening as they advanced. Even the most optimistic began to acknowledge that those who had held a contrary opinion to themselves, whom they had ridiculed as croakers, might be correct in their gloomy forebodings, after all. A feeling of suspense was in the air.

Sir Henry, who had, as we know, never been optimistic, watched keenly every symptom, and noted every beat of the national pulse. Even his books appeared to have lost their attraction, in the absorbing interest of the daily papers.

Eleanor strove hard to combat the depression of spirit which was weighing on them, one and all; with the exception of little Joan, who, childlike, was unaffected by it. She watched Mildred growing whiter and more silent every day, with deep concern; and at last, feeling that the suspense was affecting the girl's health, and that some change was imperative, suggested that she should go to stay with Mrs. Lucas for a time. The old lady was delighted, and, although Mildred was very loath to go, Eleanor insisted that it was best. And she was proved to have been right. The two women, old and young,

had but one thought, one name trembled ever on their lips, one face was ever before their eyes. This common sadness proved a bond to draw them together, and they were able, in a measure, to console each other, as Eleanor had hoped.

Meanwhile, in addition to her concern on Mildred's account, Eleanor was full of anxiety with regard to her sister-in-law. Since her hurried visit to 'Trevor Lordship' in the summer, Minnie had seldom written, and had never mentioned anything which might account for the distress she had shown then. And her silence seemed to Eleanor very unsatisfactory. She had repeatedly written both to Mrs. Trevor and Minnie, inviting them to pay her a visit, but had only received excuses in reply. Minnie either could not or would not come. After her last invitation, she had heard nothing for some weeks, but at last, one morning early in October, the long-expected letter arrived. Four sheets of note-paper, of the latest fashionable shade, covered with Minnie's large, sprawling handwriting, thickly underlined.

Eleanor found it very difficult to make head or tail of the sense it was intended to convey, but here and there a phrase was comprehendible. "I could not have believed he would behave like this"!! "I have been a fool"!! "Come to me at once, but whatever you do, don't tell a soul"!! Who 'he' was, and how 'he' had behaved Eleanor could not imagine;

but one thing was clear, she must go to Minnie without delay.

Sir Henry was standing in the hall, reading the newspaper, as she came out of the dining-room.

"Things look bad; very bad!" he muttered, as his wife approached.

"I am afraid you will be surprised," she said; "but I must go to London to-day."

"To London!" he repeated, in astonishment at such a sudden departure from the quiet routine of their days.

"Yes; I have had a letter from Minnie. She asks me to go to her at once."

"Does she give any reason for the summons?"

"Yes," replied Eleanor, hesitating; "but — she binds me to secrecy. I do not know very much, but what I do know, I cannot tell you."

"Ah! I understand. It is very good of you to go. Shall I come with you, or would you rather go alone?" But before Eleanor could reply, he added, "Perhaps under the circumstances I had better not come."

"I think I had better go alone," she agreed.

"You will want to catch the express," he said. "I will go and order the carriage."

When Eleanor was ready to start, about an hour later, she found him at the hall door.

"It is very good of you to go," he said again. "When do you think you will be back?"

"To-morrow, I hope. Or perhaps the following day. I will let you know."

"Send me news of your safe arrival," he said; and, as he helped her into the waiting carriage, he added, in a low voice, "Come back soon. We shall miss you so much."

Eleanor repeated the words over and over again to herself, as she was driven quickly down the avenue. If he missed her, as he said, perhaps they could draw nearer to each other on her return. The thought almost consoled her for going away. She dreaded the interview with Minnie. She wanted to help her if she could, but she had an inward conviction that to do so would entail something distasteful, something to which she would feel unequal. She had no confidence in her own powers of managing anything outside her own sphere and experience, and Minnie's mode of life and surroundings were, she felt, an unknown quantity. The whole affair seemed vaguely full of disagreeable possibilities. When she arrived at the railway station, she found she had twenty minutes to spare.

"Go to the post-office, and ask for the second post letters," she said to the footman. "Bring them to me here."

She entered the train, which was standing at the platform, and in a few moments the man returned.

"Those are yours, m' lady," he said. "The rest are for Sir Henry."

"I will telegraph if I wish to be met to-morrow," she said, as she dismissed him.

As the train drew out of the station, she looked absently at the letters she held in her hand. There were only three or four, and a small parcel bearing a Scotch postmark, and addressed in Mrs. Mollison's handwriting, with which she was familiar. After opening the letters, which proved quite unimportant, she locked the parcel up in her bag. She could attend to it later. Then she established herself in a corner seat, and gave herself up to her thoughts.

Every turn of the wheels seemed to carry her further from all she held dear. She wished with all her heart she had allowed her husband to accompany her. What in the world could Minnie want? Any one more worldly wise would have jumped at once to the conclusion that Minnie's difficulties were financial, but Eleanor was too unsophisticated. Before she married, her small allowance had been sufficient for her wants, or rather, perhaps, her wants had been regulated by her allowance. It would never have struck her that it could be otherwise. If you couldn't afford a thing, you did without it; it was quite simple — to her! A society where the fashion of the garment is in no way dependent upon the quantity of material available was unimagined by her.

Honest poverty among the working classes, and even among the gentry, she of course understood; but she had never met with that poverty which comes from living above your income. So this possible solution of the riddle never entered her mind.

Mrs. Trevor was dozing in the drawing-room when Eleanor was announced.

"You!" ejaculated the old lady, in surprise. "Where did you spring from?"

Eleanor was taken aback for a moment; then she understood the part she was expected to play.

"I have come to London on business, for a day or two," she replied. "So I thought I should like to come and see you and Minnie."

She tried to speak naturally, as if a flying visit to town was a mere trifle. To her it was about as serious an undertaking as St. Petersburg or Constantinople would have been to most people.

"Where are you staying?"

"I thought perhaps you would be so kind as to put me up. I am sorry I could not let you know, but I was obliged to come at a moment's notice."

Eleanor felt she could not give Minnie away. Mrs. Trevor had evidently been told nothing; but it was too bad of her sister-in-law to let her in like this.

"Of course we can put you up," said Mrs. Trevor; and then she continued, in much agitation, "I can't understand what is the matter with Minnie. I haven't

seen her since we came back from Lady Seymour's, two days ago. I have been to her door, but she won't let me in. I begged her to see a doctor; I'm sure she can't be well; but she won't answer me. The maid tells me she says she wishes to be left alone. I'm quite distracted about her!" The old lady sniffed tearfully. "I wish you would reason with her; but I'm sure she won't see you."

At this moment a maid entered.

"Mrs. Ross heard Lady Trevor arrive. She says will her ladyship please go to her at once."

"I can't understand it," said Mrs. Trevor, feebly. "She won't see me, and yet she will see you! What does it mean?"

Eleanor followed the maid upstairs. As the door opened, and she entered, Minnie rose from the depths of an arm-chair where she had been crouching miserably.

"Oh! you have come at last," she said, in a tone of great relief. "I thought you were never coming."

Her face was disfigured with crying; she looked worn and wretched. The tea-gown she wore was crumpled and disarranged. For the first time in her life, Minnie was past considering her appearance!

"I came as quickly as I could," replied Eleanor. "I only got your letter this morning."

"Oh! you don't know what I have been through!"

Minnie cried wildly. "But now you are here, you must help me. You simply must!"

"I will if I can."

"How was I to know Toby would behave like a cad; a perfect cad! We have been pals for years, and then he turns on me like this. He must know why I can't have any more to do with that odious man!"

"Do you mean Mr. Vane-Talbert? What has he been doing?"

"He declares he'll show the letter to Hugh, if I don't do what he wants," sobbed Minnie, desperately. "And you know what Hugh is! It would kill me! Hugh is most awfully straight. He wouldn't understand it at all."

"My dear Minnie," said Eleanor, breaking into this tirade, "how do you expect me to understand? What letter is he going to show to your husband? Is it yours?"

"Yes! I never thought anything of it when I wrote it! I've always been very fond of Toby, and I thought he was fond of me. But of course, if Hugh reads it, he will see it in quite a different light!"

"What was the letter about?" asked Eleanor, sternly.

"About old Brandt; but I didn't mention his name."

Eleanor was still completely at sea. She began to

feel at the end of her patience. Rising from her seat, she took the younger woman by the arm.

"Get up from the floor, Minnie. You are behaving like a perfect baby! Stop crying at once, and try and tell me the whole story."

Minnie rose, and stood with her elbows resting on the mantelpiece, and her face hidden in her hands. Seeing that she was trying to control herself, Eleanor did not speak for a few minutes.

"I don't like to tell you. I have been a perfect fool! You will be fearfully shocked," said Minnie, at last.

Eleanor thought it was extremely likely, but she said nothing. She felt a sensation as of cold water running down her spine.

"Well, you see," began Minnie, speaking very fast and low, "all last year I was very good friends with old Brandt. Of course, he's not a gentleman, or anything like one, but he was very civil and very useful. He's one of these South African finance people, and he used to give me tips. I made a heap of money. And then, three or four months ago, he insulted me, and said the most awful things, and I simply couldn't have any more to do with him. I didn't dare! And Toby has been furious!"

"What has Mr. Vane-Talbert to do with it?"

"He went in with me, you see. I hadn't got the money to start with, and Toby and I went shares.

Of course Brandt didn't know. And when I couldn't get any more tips from Brandt, Toby was furious. He says he is hard up, and wants the money. But I daren't!" Minnie turned round passionately. "I simply daren't."

"Do you mean that Brandt took your money and speculated with it?"

"Sometimes. And sometimes he would say he had bought shares for me, and he'd let me know the result. But they always went up. Never down. He was awfully clever. Sometimes — generally — he'd tell me what to buy, and then I used to tell Toby."

"Well?"

"Of course, Toby was a pal of mine, and I was very glad to do him a good turn. But when Brandt got impossible, I had to stop."

"How do you mean, impossible?"

"He tried to make love to me. Oh, Eleanor! we had an awful scene. I had been dining with him at the Savoy, — of course I was a fool to go, but I wanted some money badly just then, — and he told me the last transaction had gone wrong, and I owed him two hundred pounds. I felt pretty sick, but I didn't say anything much. Then he said he'd drive me home in his brougham, and as soon as we started he tried to kiss me, and insulted me. I was furious, and showed it. Dirty beast! And then he said the most awful things!"

"What sort of things?"

"Well, he virtually told me I was no better than I ought to be! That all I wanted was to get money out of him without paying for it, and that as soon as he suggested an honest bargain, I said he insulted me!"

Eleanor's face had grown whiter and whiter, but she did not speak, and Minnie continued:—

"I told Toby we couldn't make any more money, that I couldn't speak to Brandt again; but he said it was nonsense, and that I'd got to. Nothing that I could say would make him see that it was impossible. At last I wrote to him. I never thought of what I was writing. That was when I came up to you. The next morning I got a perfectly brutal letter from him, saying that if I didn't do what he wanted, he'd send the letter to Hugh, and tell him all kinds of things!"

"And since then?" asked Eleanor. "That is months ago."

"I've only seen him once. He's been yachting. And when I did see him, it wasn't any use — and yesterday morning I got this!"

Eleanor took the paper which Minnie held out. It was only a few lines.

I will come and see you on —— morning. This matter must be settled once and for all. I don't want to be disagreeable, but if you won't be reasonable, I have no alternative.

C. V.-T.

"You're shocked, I know," said Minnie, miserably.

"Shocked! Of course I am! We won't talk about that now. Do you remember what you wrote in the letter?"

"Only vaguely. I said, 'If you love me, you won't ask me to speak to that man again. I'll do anything in the world you ask me, except that.'"

"How did you sign it?"

"'Your loving Minnie,' I think. That didn't mean anything. I have often done that to my pals."

"Have you heard from Brandt?"

"No."

"Have you paid him?"

"Oh, no. How could I? I haven't got the money. Besides, he doesn't want it; he's got plenty. I don't believe he ever lost it!" Minnie added viciously.

Then she flung herself on her knees beside Eleanor. "You will help me, won't you? You are the only person who can help me." Then, as Eleanor did not answer, she added under her breath, "I'm sorry, you know I'm sorry!"

"What are you sorry for?" asked Eleanor, suddenly.

Minnie was startled.

"I —" she faltered, "I — am sorry — to bother you over this wretched business. I'm sorry I've been such a fool."

Eleanor rose, disregarding the crouching figure at her feet.

"You are sorry," she said sternly, "because you have, as you call it, got into a hole; but I don't believe you are sorry for the degrading part you have played in the whole thing! I don't believe you have ever thought about that."

Minnie rose to her feet, and gasped! Eleanor was standing very straight, her hands clenched at her sides, her face flushed with the force of her indignation.

"Have you thought of it?" she demanded. "Brandt was right when he said you were not an honest woman! What could be more dishonest than making friends with an impossible man, for no other reason than to make money out of him. Taking money from him, for that is what it comes to in plain English! I don't wonder he asked what you were prepared to give in return! What could be more degrading than to allow a man to be on such terms that the very idea of your husband looking at one of the letters, frightens you? I don't wonder you were frightened when you thought Hugh was coming home."

For the first time since Eleanor could remember, her temper was getting the better of her. The whole sordid story had so sickened and disgusted her that she was filled with hot indignation. Then she paused for a moment, as a thought struck her and she asked:—

"Do you care for Mr. Vane-Talbert?"

Minnie began to cry again.

"I don't care if I never see him again. He and I were very good friends. He liked to go about with me, and he was amusing."

"Amusing! I think amusement is the only thing you care for in the world. Your husband's honour doesn't seem to have the slightest value for you!"

"I have never —" began Minnie, hotly.

"I daresay not! But do you think your husband would think it was consistent with his honour that his wife should be seen alone in all sorts of places with a common money-lender? Or to sign herself to another man as 'Your loving Minnie,' and to appeal to his love for her as the strongest argument she could use?"

"I didn't mean it like that!"

"You wrote it, whichever way you meant it."

"I didn't mean any harm," pleaded Minnie.

"My dear Minnie! are you a child, or a full-grown woman? You can't plead thoughtlessness, because you had no business to be thoughtless. Of course you don't think! You don't think of anything except enjoying yourself, and you see the result!"

There was silence as Eleanor stopped speaking. She felt a little sorry she had spoken so strongly. After all, Minnie's surroundings were as much to blame as she herself. Her life had been spent in the society of people who cared for money and amusement only. They had been, as it were, her

only education. Eleanor felt the blame rested partly on Hugh Ross. He must have known the sort of woman he had married. He was years older than she was. Why couldn't he look after her? Why didn't he insist on her staying with him, or come home, and prevent her getting into these abominable situations? Eleanor herself was trying to think what was the best thing to be done. Her first idea was to send for her husband; but no! she could not do that. She knew enough of his character to know that he held extremely strong opinions on matters like this. He would be just as disgusted as she was.

She looked round the room, which, as rooms do, reflected so plainly the mind of its occupant. The dressing-table, loaded with costly silver and fashionable aids to the toilet. The bed, with its silken hangings, and exquisite embroidered coverlet; the comfortable chairs, the piles of scented cushions, all seemed to her to tell a tale of indolence and luxury which could only breed laxness of moral fibre. Photographs were everywhere — on the walls, on the tables — on the mantelpiece — quantities of them, and all, with a very few exceptions, of men! And in the way a trivial thing strikes you even in your most earnest moments, Eleanor found herself wondering how Minnie could undress and go to bed in such publicity, and then blushed at the thought!

"You will do it, won't you?" said Minnie, at last.

"Do what?"

"Get my letter back from Toby! He is coming to-morrow. You will see him, won't you, Eleanor? He would give it you at once, if you asked him."

"What makes you think that?"

"I am sure he would," said Minnie. "He would not dare to refuse. You are not the sort of woman a man would dare to threaten."

"I will try," said Eleanor. "I don't know if I shall be successful."

Then she rose, and left the room; returning after a few minutes with a cheque for two hundred pounds, which she handed to Minnie. Minnie looked at it in surprise.

"Pay this into your bank, and draw a cheque to Brandt for the amount," said Eleanor, quietly. "That is the first thing to be settled."

"Oh, Eleanor! How can I take it?"

"It is not Henry's; it is some private money of my own. You need not mind taking it. You cannot remain under an obligation to Brandt for another day."

Eleanor's habitual calmness of manner had returned to her, and she dictated the few words to be enclosed with the cheque. Then she rang the bell, and desired the maid to post the two letters herself, without delay.

CHAPTER XXII

ELEANOR INTERVENES

"Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the world o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes."
— *Hamlet.*

It was very easy for Minnie to say that Eleanor would have no difficulty in obtaining the letter from Vane-Talbert, but Eleanor herself was not at all of the same opinion.

When, at last, after a most trying evening spent alone with Mrs. Trevor, she gained the welcome solitude of her own room, she was overcome with the most acute nervousness at the thought of the interview. In vain she paced up and down, trying to think what words she should use, what arguments she should bring to bear, and — awful thought — what she should do if he refused her demand.

She had a constitutional horror of anything approaching a scene. If Vane-Talbert proved unyielding or insolent, she was sure she would be much too frightened even to argue with him; she had no means of compelling him to restore the letter, and cease his persecution of Minnie. Of course, if he was a gentleman, he would at once see that the proper

thing to do was to hand it to her at once, and go; but gentlemanly conduct was hardly to be expected from a man who could stoop to use a woman's folly as a means of making money! She had not the slightest intention of shirking the encounter, but she felt as if she were going unarmed, and hampered by inexperience and fright, to meet an opponent who would be armed at all points. If only she had some weapon with which to meet him! Never had she so longed for her husband. She had only to send for him, that she knew; but she could not do so. No! she must manage this by herself. In the first place, she could not betray Minnie, and in the second, she could not cause him the pain he would suffer through the knowledge of his sister's folly. How in the world a woman could act with such a lack of dignity, of common sense! The whole thing was so vulgar, so degrading.

At last, conscious that her thoughts were whirling in a circle, and to no purpose, she sat down and tried to control herself to a period of quiet, before going to bed. She took off the necklace and brooches she was wearing, and opened her bag, which was on a small table beside her, in order to lock them away. As she did so, she remembered the packet which had come by post that day. She would open it now. It would serve to distract her thoughts from the unpleasant subject upon which they were centred.

Inside the outer wrapper, she found another packet, tied with ribbon, and endorsed, "To be given to Lady Trevor," in Constance's handwriting; and a letter from Mrs. Mollison, to the effect that the enclosed had been found in a desk which she had only just examined. She apologized for the delay, but she had not had the heart to touch it sooner. She had not known that it contained anything for Lady Trevor.

Eleanor untied the ribbon, and opened the little packet. All that was left of a life's tragedy! A pitiful little collection! The tears rose in Eleanor's eyes as she looked. A baby's knitted sock — a soft curl of dark hair pinned to a card bearing the dates of the child's birth and death — a few blades of grass gathered from the little grave — and some papers. The first Eleanor opened was a certificate of marriage. She looked at the signatures, remembering the words Constance had spoken at their last meeting: "Afterwards you shall know everything." "Constance Fortescue and Charles Vane." So that was the name of the man who played the traitor to an innocent, trusting girl! Who was he? — Where was he now? Still waiting for the grinding of those everlasting mills, which must surely, in this case, grind exceeding small? Eleanor wondered.

The next was a few lines in a man's writing; merely an intimation of the hour at which he might be expected, signed "C." She glanced at them

without attention; she was thinking of Constance's love for this man who had so utterly betrayed her. God grant she might never meet Charles Vane!

Then — a page torn from an illustrated paper. She unfolded it. Two portraits side by side, joined by a meaningless ribbon looped in many bows, and underneath, a few lines of printed matter. Eleanor gazed at it; first in abstraction, then in wondering incredulity, at last in horrified certainty — as the truth dawned upon her. A wave of burning heat seemed to rise and envelop her, then slowly ebbed again, leaving her cold as a stone.

For a long time she sat, frozen, immovable; but at last a shudder passed over her, and recalled her to herself. With shaking hands she folded the papers into a neat packet as before. She dropped it into her bag, and turned the key. Then slowly, thinking deeply all the while, she undressed and went to bed.

The morning came, wet and stormy; the air was heavy and full of menace. Sleep had only come to Eleanor's aching eyes at the hour at which it was her usual habit to rise, and it was nearly ten o'clock before she awoke, to find a maid standing by her side with a tray in her hands, who informed her that Mrs. Trevor and Mrs. Ross were breakfasting in their rooms. Mrs. Trevor had a headache; and would her ladyship please excuse her?

It was nearly noon before Eleanor descended to

the drawing-room. She walked to the window and flung it open, feeling suffocated in the close, heavy atmosphere. At intervals she heard shouting in the street below, saw some boys with newspapers under their arms running past, and one or two people stopping to purchase from them, but she paid no attention. She stood, schooling herself to quiet, trying to control the nervous movements of her hands. She did not notice a cab draw up, and a man alight from it, and started when the door opened and Mr. Vane-Talbert was announced. He did not see her for a moment as she stood in the window recess; then she moved slowly forward.

"Ah! Lady Trevor!" he said airily. "How do you do! I didn't expect to see you. You've heard the great news, I suppose?"

He held out his hand. Eleanor apparently did not see it.

"You have come to see Mrs. Ross," she said quietly and clearly. "She does not wish to see you, and has deputed me to do so."

"I hope she isn't ill?" queried Vane-Talbert, solicitously.

Eleanor did not reply. He began to think there was something unusual in her manner. For a second he wondered how much she knew. But no! Minnie wouldn't be quite such a fool as to tell her anything.

"When did you come to London?" he continued.

"Is Sir Henry with you? He will be very much interested in the turn events have taken."

The sound of her husband's name seemed to give Eleanor courage. She drew herself up with an almost imperceptible gesture of determination, and spoke again: —

"Mrs. Ross has commissioned me to ask you for the letter which she wrote to you. Will you please give it to me?"

She held out her hand as she spoke.

"Letter?" he repeated, with a puzzled smile, which was really very well done. "I have no letter! I wrote to her to say I was coming. Did she write to me? I never got it!"

Eleanor did not withdraw her hand.

"Will you please give it to me at once."

Vane-Talbert hesitated. There was something relentless in her calm, even voice, which convinced him, even against his will, that Minnie had 'been fool enough,' as he put it. He assumed an air of engaging candour.

"To be quite frank, I hardly know what to do! I will confess I do know what letter you allude to! but Minnie has so bound me to secrecy, I can't give her away, can I?"

"Mrs. Ross has asked you for the letter repeatedly," said Eleanor, coldly. "You have refused to give it to her. Please give it to me at once!"

"Oh, no! my dear Lady Trevor, you are wrong!" he said earnestly. "The matter has been a little joke between Minnie and myself. Surely she could never have taken it seriously! Of course I will give you the letter. Here it is. I could not bear you to have such a poor opinion of me as to imagine for a moment that it was anything but a little jest between friends. I should be far too severely punished if such were the case!"

Eleanor took the letter between the tips of her fingers, glanced at it to see that it was the right one, and then laid it on the table.

She was greatly relieved, but there was still something to be done. If only her knees did not shake so! Her hands were clenched at her side in a grip that drove the nails into the white skin; her heart was pounding so loudly that she wondered how it was he didn't notice it; there was a lump in her throat which prevented her speaking.

"You do forgive me for my idle jest, don't you?" said Vane-Talbert, in a playfully pleading manner.

Eleanor's blood suddenly boiled.

"Mr. Vane-Talbert, you will go out of this room and out of this house, and you will never enter it again. You will never again speak to any member of my family, or frequent any house where they are in the habit of going."

Vane-Talbert looked aghast. "Deuced handsome

woman," he thought; "but what the devil does she mean by dictating to me like this?"

"Come, come, Lady Trevor, if this is part of the joke, you are carrying it a bit too far, don't you think? And you can't be in earnest. What earthly reason have you got for such a preposterous suggestion? If I have thoughtlessly offended Mrs. Ross, I apologize. I can't do more!"

Eleanor met his look unflinchingly.

"You will understand my reason for speaking, when I tell you that Constance Fortescue was my dear friend," she said slowly and distinctly.

"I don't understand you!" he stammered; but his words were belied by the ugly purple flush which crept over his face to the roots of his sleek, black hair.

"Do not lie."

Eleanor hardly raised her voice, but the words cut like a whip.

Slowly Vane-Talbert turned, and walked a few steps towards the door. Then he paused, hesitated, and finally turned towards Eleanor again. She was standing perfectly still, with an inexorable expression in her eyes which his own did not care to meet. He hung his head for a second.

"Where is she?" he asked, in a husky whisper.

"I decline to give you any information."

Without another word, Vane-Talbert left the room.

Eleanor tottered to a chair, and almost fell into it, spent and nerveless, shaking all over as with an ague. So Minnie found her, a few minutes later.

"Eleanor!" she cried.

Then she ran from the room, to return with a glass of wine which she administered; and then, kneeling beside her, she held her hand in silence.

Presently Eleanor recovered somewhat. She pressed Minnie's hand slightly, and her eyes travelled to the letter, which was still lying on the table. Still without speaking, Minnie rose, and taking up the letter, carried it to the fireplace, and dropped it into the heart of the flames. Then she returned to her former position, and kissed Eleanor tenderly.

"Listen!" she said. "I have heard from Hugh this morning. The doctors say he must break the journey in Egypt. I shall go to him at once. I can't thank you—"

And somehow, Minnie's silence satisfied Eleanor much more than any protestations could have satisfied her. Words came so easily to Minnie, as a rule.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOME AGAIN

"War! War! War!
Heaven aid the right,
God move the hero's arm in the fearful fight!
God send the women sleep in the long, long night,
When the breasts on whose strength they leaned
shall heave no more."

—E. C. STEDMAN.

As Eleanor drove to the station later on in the day, she realized what had been the news that Vane-Talbert had mentioned, and that the boys had been shouting in the streets. It was placarded on the hoardings. It was printed in large type at the railway station. It was WAR! Sir Henry had been right in his forebodings; it had come.

She bought all the latest editions of the afternoon papers for her husband, but, somehow, it didn't seem to interest her. Her mind failed to grasp the true significance of it.

She leaned back in the railway carriage, utterly exhausted by the events of the last two days. The strain on her nerves and on her emotions had been great. To a gentle character there is nothing so exhausting as anger, and she had been roused to the fiercest, keenest anger.

She had liked Vane-Talbert; he had stayed more than once at 'Trevor Lordship,' and had always been pleasant and courteous. She had met him first at a time when her interest in her fellow-creatures had been newly awakened, at a time when she had been ready to like every one, to see the best in every one. He had represented a new type, modern, sociable, and tactful. So far as she had judged, he was a man who, while perhaps not doing a great deal of good in the world, would certainly never do any harm.

She had read in books of girls betrayed and ruined, and when she had heard Constance's pitiful story she had quite unconsciously accepted it, as if it had been in a book. That is to say, it had never dawned upon her that any gentleman she had ever met, or would be ever likely to meet, any gentleman of birth and breeding, who was received as a guest in her house, could ever stoop to such a thing. She would as soon have suspected Sir Henry, or Roger Bolding — the two men she knew best — of deliberate murder! She had met with one or two distressing cases in her parish work, but, there again, that was among a different class, presumably less refined and less intelligent. Crime was committed, of course, but by people one did not know, not by people whom one knew, and liked, and received. There were monsters of iniquity, she supposed, in every grade of society, just as there were maniacs; but where exactly they pursued their

evil courses, she was ignorant; only, it was not where she and her friends lived and moved and had their being! Some people enjoyed vulgar and sordid intrigues and questionable dealings with their fellow-creatures; at least, so she had heard, but she had been thankful she had never met them.

This comfortable but fallacious theory had been rudely overthrown. She had received a severe shock. In consequence, she felt as if she had touched vermin, as if she had trodden in some unspeakable filth, and had been herself soiled by the contact. This feeling was partly due to her present bodily weakness; the normal balance of her mind had been disturbed by her sudden collision with the seamy side of life.

Was it only coming events that threw shadows? Did the hideous past throw no shadow? It was incredible to her that a man could appear so entirely free from care, with an ugly story like this in his life. Surely it must have dogged his every footstep. And he had shown no sign of it! His manner had been so particularly candid and courteous. Had the Psalmist spoken only the truth when he made his hasty and comprehensive statement, "All men are liars!" Had most people some dingy corner where lurked their own private skeleton? Her faith in the whole race of mankind was overthrown; perhaps even Roger Bolding was not all that she had imagined! Had he trifled

with some girl's affections, or made love to his neighbour's wife?

Then, realizing to what an awful pitch of suspicion her morbid reflections had brought her, she pulled herself up with a jerk. Such thoughts were unwholesome and evil; she would have no more to do with them. She would dismiss them from her mind. She had a physical longing for a bath, as if the material washing would help to cleanse the moral dirt which had defiled her. With the thought of her familiar room came the thought of her husband; she would soon be with him again, and, who could tell! perhaps they might meet a step further on that road she so yearned to tread with him. She gave herself up to the delightful vista into which that road would lead them, and presently relapsed into a refreshing and dreamless sleep, which lasted until she reached Larnham.

Sir Henry and Roger Bolding came out of the hall door as the carriage drew up.

"Here you are at last!" said Sir Henry. "I hope you are not too tired? It is delightful to have you back again."

"I assure you, Lady Trevor," said Bolding, "it has been a piteous spectacle! I came over this morning, not knowing you were away, and found your husband disconsolately wandering about, as if he were looking for something he could not find. I joined him, and all day long we have been disconsolate together."

Sir Henry nodded.

"I assure you it is true," he said. "Please don't smile."

Eleanor laughed.

"I hope you will be happier now!" Then she remembered, and added seriously, "But I have bad news for you both."

"What is it?" asked both men together.

"War is declared."

"Never!" said Bolding, incredulously.

"Ah!" said Sir Henry, gravely.

"I have brought you all the papers," she continued. "They were in the carriage."

Bolding went in search of them, and Sir Henry turned to his wife.

"Did you get through your business all right? I have been thinking so much about you."

"Yes!" she replied, with a little shiver of recollection.

"Satisfactorily?"

Eleanor hesitated.

"'Absolutely' is perhaps a better word. It is all over now."

Then Bolding returned, and both men plunged into the absorbing topic.

"Volunteers are coming in fast. They are being enrolled at the Cape already, I see," said Bolding, a little later.

"We shall want every man we can get," said Sir Henry. "The Boers have the advantage of fighting in a country they know, every inch of it. We shall not be able to outmanœuvre them. If we beat them, it will be by sheer force of numbers."

"Do you think so?" asked Bolding, slowly.

"I am certain of it," replied Sir Henry, with conviction.

Bolding sat in silence for a time.

"If that is the case, I shall go," he said at last.

"You!" cried Eleanor, in surprise. "They will never send the Yeomanry out!"

"I shan't wait for that," he said. "I shall go, on my own — at once."

"Will you be able to get out there, do you think?" asked Sir Henry.

"Yes, if I go at once, before there is any rush. If what you say is true, and it is going to be a big job, there's sure to be a rush presently. I'll get there first. If it proves only a flash in the pan, I can come back again. If not, why! I may give a knock for the old country."

Eleanor was speechless. For the first time, War, and what it means, was assuming its real importance. The call to arms had come. Men would go, like Bolding, without hesitation, without fuss; leaving home, kindred, friends, hardly even aware that they were answering the voice of duty; proving that

patriotism, although dormant during the stagnant years of peace, woke in an instant throughout the whole land at the nation's need.

Sir Henry held out his hand.

"God bless you, old fellow! You are right."

Bolding looked at Eleanor with keen scrutiny. In her eyes he read a frank, friendly anxiety.

"Oh, yes!" he said, with a slight touch of bitterness, "I'm just the chap to go! No wife, no ties!" Then he pulled himself together, and added, lightly, "Quite unattached, in fact. No encumbrances!"

At this moment the dressing-bell rang, and Joan came running in.

"Oh, Aunt Eleanor! I'm so pleased to see you! I'm so pleased you've come home!"

"Mr. Bolding, you'll stay to dinner, won't you?" asked Eleanor. "Do stay."

"If you will forgive my costume, I shall be delighted."

"It's pouring with rain now," said Sir Henry. "If it doesn't clear, you had better stay the night."

"Aunt Eleanor!" said Joan, "Dobbs says there's war with old Kruger. What does it mean? Does it mean we shall have to make barricades, and live in the cellar?"

Mademoiselle's instruction in French history had evidently made a strong impression!

"Oh, no; the war is in South Africa, thousands of miles away."

Joan's face fell.

"Won't there be nothing exciting? Won't the women have to load the muskets, and fetch the water? Nor nothing?"

Sir Henry answered her.

"Yes," he said slowly. "They will have to give their husbands, and their fathers, and their sons, and their lovers, and stay at home and look as if they liked it! Which will be, my dear Joan, by far the hardest part of all."

It was not until some hours later, when he and Sir Henry joined Eleanor in the drawing-room, that Bolding remembered the errand which had ostensibly brought him to 'Trevor Lordship' that day.

"Have you heard about poor Bessie?" he asked.

"No!" said Eleanor, quickly. "What is it?"

"I am sorry. I ought to have told you before, but the war news drove it out of my mind, for the time. Her husband has been caught at last. He nearly killed Broughton's under-keeper, and — Bessie is dead."

"Dead!" echoed Eleanor.

"She died of the shock of hearing of his arrest."

"Poor, poor Bessie! And the children?"

"Old Lavender brought them home last night. Bessie was buried yesterday."

"I heard nothing of it," said Eleanor in surprise.

"You would not be very likely to. They were right away at the camp at Bunton Heath."

"I knew that Lavender went back to her daughter again about a fortnight ago, but although I saw her before she went, she did not tell me Bessie was worse. She had never really recovered. Two little children, what a burden for Lavender's old age!"

"I don't suppose she'll consider them a burden," said Bolding, gently. "They'll be a comfort to her."

"We must see what can be done about the cottage, Eleanor," said Sir Henry. "I heard not long ago it was for sale. Perhaps you would like to buy it, and let her off the rent. That would be a little help."

"I doubt if she'd do it," said Bolding. "She's a good woman, with a sturdy, independent spirit which you don't see too much of nowadays."

"I'll see her to-morrow," said Eleanor. "Thank you very much for the suggestion, Henry. It is very good of you."

Then the conversation turned again to the war, and Bolding's departure.

"I can't believe you are really going," said Eleanor. "It is horrible. We shall miss you dreadfully."

"Shall you take any horses?" asked Sir Henry.

"I'm not sure. I've two which might be useful, if I can get them out. I can't really tell until I get to London, and see how things are."

"You'll come back again before you really start?" she asked.

"No," he said slowly. "I don't think I shall. Oh! I'll come over again before I go to London; I don't mean that. But once I get there, I shall stand by for the first passage that comes along, or I may miss it."

"I can't bear to think of your going."

"Can't you?" he said, with a little smile.

Sir Henry was looking at his wife.

"Eleanor," he said suddenly, "you look dreadfully tired. All this talk has been too much for you. I will take Bolding into the library."

Eleanor rose.

"I think I will go to bed," she said. "I have had rather a long day."

"I must be getting home too," said Bolding. "May I order my horse?"

"I wish you would stay the night," said Eleanor. "Just listen to the wind and the rain," as a gust shook the windows violently.

"It won't hurt me! I feel rather in the mood for a tussle with the elements to-night."

"Good-night," she said, as she held out her hand. "You'll come over and say good-bye, won't you?"

"Yes," he answered. "I will come to say — good-bye —"

Sir Henry walked with his wife to the foot of the stairs.

"You are not ill, are you?" he asked anxiously. "You look fearfully white." He took hold of her arm gently as he spoke.

"Oh, no! I am not ill!" she answered quickly. "Only tired."

"I hope you will be better in the morning. If not, I shall send for the doctor!"

"That won't be necessary, I assure you," she said, smiling. "Good-night!"

CHAPTER XXIV

LAVENDER'S BABIES

"Here the heart
May give a useful lesson to the head,
And learning wiser grow without his books."
—COWPER.

"AH! m' lady," said Lavender. "What a rain, to be sure! 'Tis no fit weather for you to be out."

The old woman closed the door with difficulty against a gust of wind, as Eleanor stepped into the little shop.

"I waited until this afternoon in the hope that it would clear, but there seems no sign of improvement. I wanted so much to see you. I have been so sorely grieved to hear of your sorrow. I was away yesterday, or I should have come sooner."

"I heard you was away, m' lady. Aye! it has been a sad time! I had no means of sending you word from the Camp, or I would have done so. You were always so kind in wishing to hear of my girl."

"Poor Bessie!" said Eleanor, softly. Then, laying her hand on the old woman's shoulder, she added kindly, "You must not grieve for her."

"No, m' lady, I do not grieve for her. I have it in

my heart to thank God that she's spared more sorrow. He was no good, her man — she never would see it, but it's the truth. There could never have been any happiness for her, and she always took things hard. So it's best as it is." Lavender wiped the tears from her eyes with the corner of her apron. "Ah, well!" she added, "there's more to do in this world than fret."

"Yes," replied Eleanor. "You will have so much to do now. May I see the babies?"

"Come into the back room, and welcome, m' lady. The little one, she's asleep, but Willie, he's playing with his toys. You'll excuse a muddle, I know."

"I don't see any muddle to excuse!" said Eleanor, smiling, as she entered the cosy room.

In the centre of the floor a small boy of three or four years old was sitting, playing with a battered wooden horse and some empty reels. A sofa was drawn up near the fire, and on it, in a warm nest of shawls, lay the sleeping infant. Old Lavender drew aside the coverings with a gentle hand.

"Isn't she a beauty?" she said proudly. "I had a bit of trouble with her at first. She wouldn't take to the bottle. But to-day she's doing fine."

Eleanor bent over and looked at the babe. She put her finger into the little hand lying curved like an exquisite shell, and immediately the tiny fingers tightened over it with the clinging confidence of in-

fancy. Somewhere in Eleanor's heart a chord, hitherto untouched, tightened in instant response.

"'Tis time for her bath," said Lavender. "Will you mind, m' lady, if I get the things ready?"

With a gesture of assent, Eleanor drew up a low chair, and sat down beside the couch. Not for the world would she have withdrawn from that little tender clasp. Old Lavender bustled about, clearing away the tea things which lay on the table, setting the kettle to boil, and hanging little garments to warm in front of the fire. And all the while she kept up a little ripple of conversation.

"That do seem terrible news about the war! Ah! that'll bring sorrow to many a poor soul. Mrs. Giles, she's wonderful put about. She's got two boys soldiers. And Mrs. Rogers, she's got one, and my sister's got a grandson — he's in Africa now."

"It will be a terribly anxious time for them," agreed Eleanor.

"Aye, so it will! 'Tis but human nature. It didn't ought to be, but so it is."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, m' lady, 'tis this way. Seems to me we're here for a time, and at the end of our time we go, be it soon or late."

"But this war must mean many lives cut short. It seems so dreadful."

"Ah, but that ain't so, really. 'Tisn't a matter of

a life, 'tis a matter of a job. When our job's done, we go. But no one goes, not before."

Eleanor smiled at the simple statement.

"Well, then, this will mean the end of many poor men's 'jobs.'"

"Then they'll get their penny," said Lavender, sturdily. "Whether they've worked for an hour, or whether they've borne the burden and heat of the day. They've done their job, that's all. Who knows but that God's got another for them in another place? I like to think that maybe He's set my girl to mind the babies! She was wonderful fond of little ones, was my Bessie."

"Think of the poor sad hearts left behind," Eleanor urged gently.

"Ah! there you're right, m' lady. Sad hearts there will be. But look at it which way you will, sorrow is always for the poor ones left behind. 'Tis mostly a selfish feeling, when you get to the bottom of it. I'm sad because I'm a selfish old woman. I'd fain have kept my maid. My old eyes are sore for the sight of her. But if I wasn't selfish, I'd praise God who took her out of it all. And I do," she added stoutly. "I thank God for His mercies. Now, if 'tis His will to spare me till the babies are ready to do for themselves, that's all I ask. If He doesn't, well, 'twill be all for the best, I've no doubt of that. 'Tis wonderful the blessings He sends!"

"You are always so thankful," said Eleanor, hesitatingly. "And yet you have had so many troubles in your life!"

"Aye! I've had troubles, for sure," was the answer. "But praise God I must, and will, m' lady; I've not done praising yet along of my redemption! 'Tis a matter some folks seem to forget — but not I! That's a great matter for sure! Now, Willie boy!" she added, cheerfully, "out of the road! Where's that old gee-gee? Bless me if that head ain't off again, and only stuck on this morning."

"Poor gee-gee, no head," lisped the boy. "Willie cry!"

"Not much use crying! That won't mend it. Grannie'll stick it on again to-morrow. Where's the box? Put 'em all to bye-bye!"

The little fellow obediently gathered all his playthings, and carried them to his grandmother, who laid them away in an old soap box. Then she went to the larder, and returned with a large slice of bread and butter, and a cup of milk, which she placed on the table.

"Here's your supper, Willie boy," she said, lifting him into a chair. "Say your grace like a man."

Willie folded his hands, and murmured a few unintelligible words. His pious intention, however, appeared to satisfy the old woman, who allowed him to attack his simple meal, which he did with evident relish.

"Baby is waking, I think," said Eleanor. "She has opened her eyes."

Old Lavender came and lifted the child from the sofa.

"Eh! my beauty," she said fondly. "Show the lady your pretty eyes."

"May I stay while you put her to bed?" Eleanor asked eagerly.

"And welcome, m' lady! I'm proud for you to see her!"

With tender dexterity, Lavender laid the child on her knee, undressed it, bathed it, and caressed it with the foolish nursery endearments which have survived the wisdom of the ages, which originated probably with Eve herself, and have lasted until now. Surely Eve must have played 'This little pig' with the pink toes of her offspring, or, at all events, the antediluvian equivalent for that historic game. Because poor, ill-fated Cain was doomed to sin and sorrow, there is no reason to suppose that he was not a most attractive baby! How many mothers' hearts since then, alas! have ached with the same bitter grief for their first-born?

At last the baby, washed, fed, and contented, was placed in Eleanor's willing arms. Maybe old Lavender's shrewd eyes noted the loving interest with which she had watched the simple ceremony, and divined something of the strange emotion which was

playing a new and sweet music on Eleanor's heart-strings.

"Sit you there, by the fire, m' lady, and nurse her, while I run up and tuck Willie boy upstairs. Never you be afraid, m' lady, she's a wonderful good child. She never cries. Say good-night to the lady, Willie, my lad!"

Little Willie obediently approached Eleanor, to proffer a rather sticky hand. He skirted carefully round the bath, and the other paraphernalia of the baby's toilet, but his walking powers were none of the steadiest, and in spite of Lavender's warning cry, "Eh! mind the fire!" he gave a lurch forward. Eleanor caught him as he fell, and exactly how it happened she could not tell — but a stream of boiling water from the half overturned kettle on the hob poured over her arm. In the moment of intense anxiety she hardly noticed it; the boy gave a scream of terror, which was smothered on Lavender's breast.

"He isn't hurt, is he?" asked Eleanor, quickly. "I think it must have caught in my sleeve."

"There! there! my fellow, that's all right! There's nought to cry for," said the old woman, soothingly. "But you, m' lady, did it scald you?"

"No, not a bit; and it didn't touch baby. See, it has not even damped her skirt!"

"That's a blessing!" said Lavender, heartily. "I was afeared for you both for the moment."

Left alone with her drowsy burden, Eleanor sat on, gazing with entranced eyes at the little rosy face. She drew the babe closer to her bosom, and as she laid her cheek upon the downy head, her whole heart went out to it in yearning love. Constance's words returned to her mind. 'To carry love under your heart, and in your arms!' Ah! if God in His infinite compassion would some day give her such a treasure to have and to hold! Her child — and Henry's. Her face flushed, and her eyes grew misty with longing. The babe raised one hand and laid it against her face. She pressed it to her lips. All the latent mother-love welled up in her heart, and overflowed in her eyes. Some day — perhaps. Some day!

Outside the wind howled, and the rain fell in torrents, beating against the latticed window, but Eleanor never heeded. She was lost in a vision which floated before her, radiant — divine! Closer and closer she drew the babe to her breast, and rocked it to and fro in a very ecstasy of love.

Old Lavender put the boy safely into his bed in the old raftered room overhead. Just as she had done so, she heard the sharp tinkle of the shop bell. "Coming!" she called, cheerily. But it was a few minutes before she had folded the child's clothes, kissed him, and extinguished the light. Then she moved slowly down the narrow winding stairs; they

were dark and uneven, and her old knees were stiff. As she reached the lowest step, she stopped suddenly. Sir Henry Trevor was standing, gazing into the inner room, where, all unconscious of his presence, his wife was crooning to the babe in her arms. Lavender could see her from the stairway. Her face reflected the beauty of her thoughts, her eyes were fixed upon the little face. Her gaze was not more intent than Sir Henry's, as he watched her. For some seconds there was silence, broken only by Eleanor's low, soothing murmur. No one moved — no one spoke. Then, Sir Henry drew himself up, and slowly — as if unable to tear himself away — he turned and left the shop, as he had come — without speaking.

Whatever may have been old Lavender's thoughts, she made no comment as she busied herself with simple duties. Presently, the little lids closed over the blue eyes, the little thumb fell away from the rosy mouth — the babe slumbered, sweetly and soundly. Eleanor rose; she laid the child on the sofa, and drew the coverings round it with lingering tenderness.

"Good-night, Lavender," she said. "Thank you."

"'Tis no fit night for you, to be sure, m' lady," said the old woman, as she opened the door, but Eleanor did not answer, as she stepped out into the darkness.

She walked swiftly homeward, unconscious of the

rain which beat upon her uncovered face. In her heart was sounding still the strange sweet music. She felt still the caress of the tiny hand upon her cheek, and the warmth of the tender form within the hollow of her arm.

It was not until she reached her room that she became aware that she was suffering acutely. The exaltation of her mind had overruled all physical sensation for the time. But as she took off her coat, the pain of her scalded arm became almost unbearable.

"I have had a slight accident, and burnt my arm, Wilson," she said to her maid. "I think you must bind it up for me, and give me the lace gown with the long sleeves."

"Oh! m' lady! what a dreadful burn," cried the woman, aghast, as she stripped off the sleeve carefully. "If you will wait a moment, I will fetch some ointment. Mrs. Johns has some which she made for one of the servants a few days ago"; and later, when the dressing was complete, she said, "Will you not let me arrange a sling for it, m' lady?"

"Oh, no," said Eleanor, decidedly. "I do not wish any fuss made about it. It is better already, thank you."

"Did you get very wet?" asked Sir Henry, as his wife entered the drawing-room. "It is a wretched night."

"I don't think it was raining much when I came in. I didn't notice it."

"I hear the floods are out all round Larnham, and trees are down in many places. Two have fallen in the Park. It is the worst storm they have had in this part of the country for years."

As Eleanor took the arm he offered, he laid his other hand on hers, for a moment, and seemed about to speak, but he did not do so, and they passed into the dining-room.

During the meal they talked of Bolding, whom Sir Henry had seen that day, and of his preparation for his departure; of the war, and its probable duration; and every now and then Sir Henry's eyes would seek his wife's with a curiously intent expression. When dinner was over, he walked with her into the drawing-room.

"I do not want to smoke," he said. "May I come with you?"

Eleanor nodded. There was something unusual in his manner to-night, and an inflection in his voice as he spoke which made her heart beat more quickly. She sat down in her chair, and took up some knitting, but, finding her arm too painful, laid it down again.

Sir Henry stood leaning against the mantelpiece, with his eyes fixed upon her face.

"It is nice to have an evening alone," he said slowly. "I don't often get you to myself."

A pulse in Eleanor's throat began to throb with

almost painful rapidity. She could not meet his eyes.

"You are happy?" he asked, almost roughly.

"Yes," she answered rather unsteadily.

"Could you be happier?" he asked again, but much more gently. "Look at me," he said, as she made no reply. He moved a step forward as he spoke. "Could you be happier?"

The feeling in his voice compelled Eleanor to raise her eyes. Then, overcome by a blind instinct to escape, she rose hurriedly, and turned away. In a moment she felt his arms round her. He drew her closer to him. "Eleanor!" he said, in a low, tense whisper.

She tried in vain to smother the scream of physical agony which escaped her lips.

"Oh! — Don't — !"

Sir Henry released her instantly, and stood looking at her, as she sank into a chair, white and trembling.

"I beg your pardon!" he said stiffly. Then — he walked to the door.

Half stupefied by the intense pain of her arm, which had been crushed in his embrace, Eleanor could not speak. Another moment, and it was too late, for she was alone.

CHAPTER XXV

AN ACCIDENT AND A STORM

"The storm is up, and all is on the hazard."
—JULIUS CÆSAR.

THE next morning, under the care of Wilson, Joan departed for her weekly music lesson at Townborough. The child showed signs of a considerable aptitude for music, and Eleanor had arranged for her to have a course of lessons from a good master. It was the rule for her to drive to Larnham every Thursday, and then go by train to Townborough, returning the same way in the afternoon. And to-day, Eleanor was glad to be alone.

More than once during the morning she had found herself at the door of her husband's library; but she had lacked the courage to enter. If only she could go to him and explain the cause of her action of the night before! but every time she reached the door, shyness overcame her.

At last, feeling restless and overwrought, she put on her hat and coat, and started to walk, hoping that the exercise might soothe her nerves. On all sides she saw traces of the havoc wrought by the storm. A large bough of the cedar lay across the lawn, the scar of its wrenching showing like a white seam on

the rugged trunk of the parent tree. About fifty yards from the house, a giant elm had broken off close to the ground, leaving only a few feet of splintered ruin to mark the spot where it had stood in its pride and strength a few short hours before.

For the moment the rain had ceased, but low, inky clouds scudded across the sky, driven swiftly by the force of the wind, which had not abated. As Eleanor battled against its sudden onslaughts, her mood was in tune with it, for in her heart there surged a fierce, wild joy. What mattered a few moments of misunderstanding? When next they met, surely that could be easily explained — easily put right. Surely his action could only bear one interpretation — he loved her — he wanted her! He had not been in the house at luncheon time; that was not unusual, and she had been glad of it. When they met again, she hoped so much that they might be alone together; just he and she — that there might be no witness to that meeting which was to alter the whole of life, for her — and for him.

Absorbed in her thoughts, she did not notice how time was passing, nor that the clouds were becoming every moment more threatening, until a few drops of rain recalled her to the present. On looking at her watch, she found it was half past three, and hurriedly retraced her steps. At the hall door she found the butler waiting.

"Has Miss Joan returned?" she asked.

"No, m' lady, not yet. The carriage went to meet her as usual."

"The weather looks very bad. I shall be glad when she comes in."

"Very bad this afternoon, m' lady." And then the man added, "I can see the brougham now, m' lady, coming in at the gate."

Eleanor turned to look, and as she watched, she noticed that the coachman was driving quickly, almost recklessly, very different to Dobbs's usual sedate pace. With a sudden premonition of evil she exclaimed: —

"Something is wrong! What can be the matter?"

The horses pulled up with a clatter, and Dobbs said, quickly,

"I beg your pardon, m' lady, Miss Joan has not come! The train was delayed. There has been an accident."

"An accident?"

"Yes, m' lady. They say the line broke down with the water, about a mile out of Townborough; but I couldn't get to know any particulars. I came back as fast as I could for orders, m' lady."

The man's voice was full of anxiety, and the end of the sentence was lost in a sudden gust of wind and rain.

"An accident! Little Joan!" Eleanor flew to

the library, and for the first time in her life entered without hesitation. Sir Henry was standing by the fire.

"Henry!" she gasped. "Joan! There has been an accident!"

"Where?" he asked, turning quickly.

"Near Townborough. The line is under water!"

"All right; I'll go! Try not to be anxious." He was half-way across the room as he spoke. "Turner! order the mares and the phaeton, at once!"

Turner ran out to tell Dobbs, who drove quickly to the stables.

"I must come!" said Eleanor.

"Very well," replied her husband. "It will be a rough drive, but it will be better for you than sitting here."

Eleanor ran upstairs, and returned in a very short time, ready to start. Sir Henry was just buttoning his coat. He looked at her as she approached.

"Are you well wrapped up? No! that's no use. Turner! where is my fur coat? Put this on," he said, when the man brought it. "And take off that hat. This cap will be warmer. The wind is stronger than you think." Then he took a lace scarf from Eleanor's hand. "Let me do it," he said. Neatly and expeditiously he wound the scarf round her head and neck, tying it firmly under her chin, and tucking the ends inside the coat, which he buttoned with care.

"There!" he said, "that is better. Try not to be too anxious; I am sure the child is all right."

The pair of young, half-broken mares were kicking and plunging as Dobbs brought them round. A stableman ran to their heads. Dobbs got down. Sir Henry walked round, examining the harness with a critical eye.

"Take up that curb two rings," he said sharply. Then he mounted the box. "Come, Eleanor," he said, holding out his left hand. "Whoa! my lass, steady!" Eleanor scrambled up as he steadied the horses with voice and hand. "Now Tom!—No, Dobbs, not to-night. This is no job for you!"

The old servant ventured on a word of protest.

"Oh! please, Sir Henry."

"No!" repeated his master, kindly but decidedly. "Up you get, Tom, and don't get down till I tell you! Remember that!"

Once their heads were released, the horses changed their minds, and appeared as anxious to stand still as they had previously been to depart. Sir Henry raised his whip, and brought it down heavily, twice. With a rear and a plunge they started at full gallop. Through the gates they flew as if pursued by furies.

"It's all right!" said Sir Henry, shortly, without turning his head, and for the next half mile he was fully occupied in keeping the excited beasts under control. He was absolutely cool and collected, and apparently perfectly confident.

Eleanor watched him with astonishment. This side of his character was entirely new to her. In spite of her anxiety, she felt an excitement which grew stronger every moment. The pair steadied presently into a trot, which was interrupted every few paces by an excited plunge, or a shy at a puddle.

"They're all right," said Sir Henry. "They're young. I've been breaking them in the early mornings. They're not quite fit for a lady yet." He stooped over and arranged the rug more securely over Eleanor. "Frightened?" he asked.

"No," she answered quietly.

"That's all right."

All went well until, as they turned sharply to the right along the Larnham road, they met the full force of the gale; wind and rain straight in their faces. The nervous mares pulled up short, hesitated, and swerved. The groom rose from his seat; then, remembering Sir Henry's words, sat down again abruptly, casting anxious glances over his shoulder. Crack! Crack! Down came the whip, in an instant raising weals along the sleek bay flanks. The mares evidently considered the weather the lesser evil, for they threw themselves into the collars. The roar of the wind and the rain drowned the rattle of the pole chains and the wheels; it screamed past like witches let loose, it tore at Eleanor's wraps, and stung like needles against her face. After a while, Sir Henry shouted: —

"I shall go across the fields. It will save a couple of miles." He moved forward on his seat. "Stoop behind me, I can shelter you a bit!" He raised his arm, and she crouched close to him.

All thought of their errand was gone, all anxiety swept away, torn into ribbons by the exhilaration which possessed her, body and soul. The fury of the elements, the excitement of her nerves, the closeness of physical contact, set her pulses throbbing with a mad delight. Her husband stooped again. He looked into her eyes, and she met his fearlessly.

"All right?" he asked tenderly.

Eleanor laughed. A low laugh of absolute content. Then the gale was on them again, and drowned the word he spoke. On and on they went; the mares going well, with long, raking strides, which threw the miles behind them. Hedges and trees slipped past, indistinct and ghostly. At last Sir Henry pulled up. "Gate!" he shouted, and Tom leaped from the carriage. Down fell the whip again, and they were cantering over the grass meadows, which even here, although still on high ground some miles from the river, showed patches of gleaming water in the gathering dusk. There was a splash as the near mare lost her footing on the marshy ground, but she was up again in an instant, and, snorting with terror, the pair dashed on. On and on — first grass for a bit — then more water — then a sharp pull up along

a hedgerow. "Look out!" cried Sir Henry. Eleanor crouched behind him, as a low bough swept over their heads — a lurch — a small bank — a thump —and they were on the high road again. A jerk over a branch lying in the way threw her forward; in an instant her husband's arm was round her. He held her for the fraction of a second — did he say "Nell"? or was it her imagination? She hardly knew —she hardly cared. Had death itself faced her with unspeakable torments, she would not have flinched! As she leaned against him, she could feel the strong muscles of his arm working as he controlled the horses — every fibre of her being thrilled in response.

On and on; the mares were going slower now — sobered by the familiar feel of the road under their feet, their spirits chastened, but not subdued. Tom, behind, began to draw his breath more freely. Never, in the whole course of his rural life, had he had such an experience. He ceased to repeat the grace before meat, which had been the only prayer he had been able to remember, and began to think of the story he would tell later. His opinion of Sir Henry had been high before; he had seen him handle the mares from the first, but, as he expressed it later, "Lord! you should have seen him handle them fillies that night!"

The lights of Townborough twinkled in the distance; the wind lessened as the road passed under the sheltering side of a wood.

"Don't be anxious," Sir Henry said consolingly. "We shall soon be in now."

Eleanor sat up straight. The spell broke. The nearness of human habitation necessitated composure, and with some degree of calmness came again the thought of little Joan. How could she have forgotten her?

They clattered up the street, and into the station yard. Tom jumped down, and ran to the horses' heads.

"Wait here," said Sir Henry; and he got down quickly and went into the station. After a minute he returned. "It's all right," he called cheerily; "we shall find the child at the hotel."

He helped her down; they walked across the yard; and in another moment, Joan was in Eleanor's arms.

"Oh! Aunt Eleanor, it was such fun," she cried, dancing about. "We were all in the water! They had to get a boat before we could get out!"

"Oh, m' lady, it was dreadful!" said Wilson, tearfully. "Did you get my telegram? I kept telling Miss Joan we could not expect you for another hour. She is so excited I can't keep her quiet."

"Oh, Uncle Henry! it was a sort of bump, and a shiver, and then we fell on to the floor!"

"Did the carriage turn over?"

"No, not ours. Only the engine and the front one. It was such a bump!"

"Hush! hush!" said Eleanor, soothingly. "Try not to think any more about it."

"We must try and get her home as quickly as we can," said Sir Henry, leaving the room. He returned after a few minutes.

"Broughton is here," he said, "with his motor. "He's going to send you back in it."

Eleanor rose.

"And you — ?" she faltered.

"I must drive the horses back; but you'll be best in the motor. You'll have to go some way round to avoid the water, but you'll be back in half an hour."

He carried the child to the waiting car, and they sped away into the darkness.

Two hours later, Eleanor was pacing up and down her room. She had undressed, and put on a loose white gown; her long hair fell in two shining plaits far below her waist. She had left Joan asleep at last, with a maid to watch her. Now, at last, she was alone — alone with her joy, and her hope!

She had been disappointed at not returning with her husband; but of course it was necessary she should come with little Joan — but — he would come — surely he would come to her. He would take her in his arms as he had done last night — and she would tell him of her love — and sob the last trace of her longing away upon his breast!

Listen as she might for the sound of horses trotting, she could hear nothing but the howling of the wind. Wilson knocked at the door.

"Can I help you, m' lady?" she asked. "It's getting very late, and you are so tired."

Eleanor dismissed her kindly, but the faithful woman was not to be denied, and in half an hour she came again. This time Eleanor could not refuse her, so she went to bed to satisfy the maid, who attended to her requirements, and arranged the room for the night. Then she turned off the light, and Eleanor was alone again. She lay perfectly still, perfectly rigid, with every nerve strung tensely to its highest pitch, one question repeating itself over and over again, "Will he come?"

After a long time, — was it one hour? or was it ten? she could not tell, — the door opened softly. Eleanor did not move — she could not move. Then — she heard the rustle of a dress — she could have screamed, but she made no sound. The woman crept to the bedside, and after standing a moment, went out again, and shut the door softly.

Eleanor sprang up; she could lie still no longer. Surely that was the sound of horses — at last — but no — it was only the frenzy of the gale! Up and down the room she paced — listening — listening — At last — she heard a door bang, somewhere in the house, and footsteps, soft, but unmistakable, coming

up the stairs. In the passage they stopped for a while — Eleanor strained her ears in vain. Then — slowly they came nearer — and halted outside her door. She made no sound, only her hands clasped over her heart to still its wild beating; every second seemed a thousand years. Her eyes were fixed upon the handle of the door. They were shining like stars — her whole face transfigured with the greatness of her love.

"Surely —"

Then slowly — lingeringly — but unmistakably — the footsteps moved again — receding this time — until they died away.

For a minute Eleanor stood, unable to grasp the truth, unable to believe that her ears did not deceive her. Then — she sank down on the floor, and buried her burning face in her hands.

Sir Henry had been delayed at Townborough; one of the mares had cast a shoe. It took some time to have this matter put right, and then he started on his homeward drive. It was impossible to hurry; the strength of the young animals had been heavily taxed already. Eager as he was to arrive at his journey's end, he was forced to let them take their own time.

At last he reached the Lodge, and turned into the avenue. His eyes scanned the house, only to be disappointed. There was no light in Eleanor's window.

How he had counted on seeing that light he did not realize until now.

He drove into the stable yard, and after a word to the waiting coachman, he entered the house by the side door. Divesting himself of coat and cap, he walked quickly, but softly, up the stairs. Wilson was standing like a faithful watch dog at the open door of Joan's room.

"All right?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Yes, sir! Miss Joan and m' lady are both asleep. I have just come from her ladyship. She seemed so tired that I was anxious, but she's in a beautiful sleep now."

Sir Henry said nothing. Stepping very softly to his wife's door, he stood — listening — listening. Once his hand moved to the handle, but he drew it back. He could hear no sound. Then, slowly, he retraced his steps, and went downstairs.

It was the next morning. Sir Henry was standing in the hall, ostensibly reading the newspaper. If any one had been there, however, they would have seen that his attention was elsewhere. His eyes turned constantly in the direction of the staircase, and he was evidently waiting for a sound that did not come. There was something expectant in his whole figure, as he stood there listening. Presently he threw down the paper, and took out his watch. It was nearly

eleven o'clock. Then a door opened, and Turner came in.

"Dobbs has sent in, Sir Henry, to say that he would be glad if you would come round to the stables at once. Something wrong with one of the mares, sir."

Sir Henry hesitated for a moment.

"Very well," he said; "I will come."

He picked up a cap, and walked out of the front door. About five minutes later Eleanor came slowly down the stairs, and entered the morning room. Her face was very white; blue lines under her eyes told plainly of her vigil and her tears. The listless droop of her whole body spoke of hope departed. She walked to the window, and stood staring out into the sullen greyness of the day. The wind had fallen; there was just enough now to send an occasional shiver, as if of pain, through the tree-tops; just enough to echo with a sobbing murmur through their shattered boughs. The rain had ceased, but the skies were dull and heavy. The elements seemed spent after their passion, weary and desolate. Grey world — grey skies — and before Eleanor's eyes there seemed to unroll in front of her a long, straight road, seemingly endless. Far, far into the future she could see it — and always she walked on it alone. No flowers — no trees. No strong arm to shield her from the stones upon the way — she could feel the strength of it now against her own, as she had felt it

last night — was it last night, or was it centuries ago? . . .

A sound made her turn her head, as Roger Bolding walked into the room.

"Good-morning, Lady Trevor," he said. "I have just left your husband in the stables. He said you weren't down yet. I was so sorry to hear of your anxiety last night; I hope you are none the worse. You look dreadfully tired."

"I am tired," she replied; "but nothing more. Joan will be all right in a day or two. She is suffering from the effects of the excitement, so I am keeping her in bed."

"It was a narrow escape. I saw the engine in the water this morning as I rode past. The rails had slipped. It is lucky no lives were lost. It is sad about the mare; she seems in a bad way."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Eleanor. "I had not heard."

"Your husband seems to think she may pull through. You had a thrilling drive last night!"

"Yes!" she repeated slowly. "I had a thrilling drive last night."

Bolding looked at her keenly; she seemed changed somehow. For an instant a wild thought shot through his mind, only to be as instantly dismissed.

"Well," he said, after a pause. "My preparations are completed. They didn't take long."

"When are you going?"

"I am going to-morrow. I have come to say — good-bye — "

"So soon — ?"

"Yes. I have had a telegram from a friend I wrote to at the War Office. He thinks he can help me if I'm on the spot. I'm taking a couple of horses, and my man. He has been with me for years — a good fellow — he insists on going with me. You can imagine me sitting on the wharf at Southampton, waiting for a boat!"

"It seems so very sudden," said Eleanor.

The war, South Africa, and even Roger Bolding, seemed quite remote, outside the compass of her brain this morning.

"It is not sudden, really," he answered slowly. "My going, I mean. I have been meaning to go for some time. It is better that I should go. Then when the war came, it gave me my chance."

"I am sorry you are going."

"Are you?" he said, with a faint smile. "I wonder — shall I tell you why I go?"

He turned and walked across the room, and continued speaking with his back towards her.

"You asked me months ago why I didn't marry. Shall I tell you? There is one woman in the world for me, — one woman whom I love, — and we met too late. That is all. That is why I am going."

What did he mean? Eleanor did not understand. She could only think of Mildred. Was it possible that he had loved the girl? He came nearer to her. His face looked drawn, his eyes very sad.

"Did you never guess? But there — why do I ask? I know you never did! Well, I'm going now; we are going to say good-bye — we may never meet again; and before I go, I will tell you the truth. I love one woman! I am hers, utterly — body and soul, and she doesn't want me, doesn't even know! Don't you know? Can't you guess — that I love — you?"

Eleanor put up her hands as if to avoid a blow, his words were so absolutely unexpected.

"Oh — No, no!"

"Don't be frightened," he said more quietly, as if under a strong restraint. "A man's honest love never hurt a woman yet. I would not hurt you! And I did want you to know. You do not love me — I know it. Perhaps I might have made you love me," he added, with a touch of grimness in his voice. "I never tried — thank God! Only!" and he gave a little laugh which was very sad to hear, "I can't be with you any longer, and hide it. A man gets to his limit some day — and then — well, I might hurt you — without wanting to!"

Eleanor had sunk into a chair; her hands were gripping the arms, the knuckles showing white with

the force of her grasp. Her eyes — dilated — frightened — were fixed upon his face.

"And so — I go! Thank you," he said gently, "for many happy days, many words of good counsel, many friendly actions. You have given me all you could — more, far more than I deserve. Don't look like that! There is no need! I'm going willingly — gladly! I may do something useful — who knows — something more worthy of your friendship, than this idle, useless life."

"You will come back," she faltered.

"Who knows?" he answered, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I might almost say I hope not! Don't trouble about me! Give me a thought sometimes, just a happy, careless thought — that's all I ask."

Eleanor rose to her feet, and held out both her hands. He took them in his — and gazed into her eyes.

"Ah! my dear! my dear!" he said brokenly. "If things had been different!" He pressed his lips passionately to the hands he held. "Good-bye!" he said.

"God bless you, my friend!" she whispered.

Bolding did not speak, only his grip tightened on her hands with a painful intensity. Then, he released them — and without looking back, he left her.

Eleanor dropped back into her seat, and, laying her

head upon her folded arms, burst into a passion of weeping. For one moment she wished desperately that she could have taken this man's strong, honest affection — for such she knew it to be, she could not doubt it. How she longed to be loved like this!

Truly she was brought very low, she thought bitterly. How often had she condemned women who had turned from their husbands to the love of another. And now! If, as he had said, things had been different, she could have cared for him, deeply, truly. As it was, with her heart half broken with a love that seemed to her unreturned, undesired — she had nothing to give him — but if things had been different! Ah! If!

She was physically worn out with her emotion of the previous night, and she lay there — her whole frame shaking from time to time with heavy, shuddering sobs. She was lost to her surroundings. She did not hear the door open, or see her husband enter. Sir Henry walked in, quickly, eagerly. He stopped abruptly when he saw her. For a long moment he watched her, the colour slowly fading from his face, leaving it ashen grey. Then he turned, and with his head bent upon his breast he walked slowly to the library — he entered — the key turned sharply in the lock — and there was silence.

CHAPTER XXVI

EUREKA!

"That power
Which erring men call chance."

—MILTON.

PATIENCE and courage were undeniably qualities sorely needed by many sad hearts in England, during the months which followed the events recorded in the last chapter, for the optimists who had cheerfully asserted that "it would be over in six months" were destined to find themselves very much in the wrong. Who can ever forget the cloud of anxiety and sorrow which brooded over the whole country in the early part of the year 1900, when reverses and loss met our armies at every turn, when the sound of running feet in the street, and the newsboy's shrill cry of "SPECHUL EDITION" made the heart stand still with fear, lest one beloved name should be among those who had answered to a more powerful call than that of patriotism?

Roger Bolding, contrary to his expectations, had not been able to get out to South Africa for many weary weeks, which time he spent, with many other good fellows, in worrying a much harassed War Office, and in eating his heart out with impatience.

Poor Jim had at length been persuaded that it was useless idling away his days chasing phantom gleams of hope, which had invariably ended in darkness, and was now working at his business in London. Whether the business gained greatly by the very half-hearted attention he bestowed upon it was another matter; as Captain Maitland said, "It's better for the lad! Better for the lad." So Mrs. Lucas had her boy at home in the evenings, and was almost happy in consequence. She would have been quite happy if she had been able to make him see that it would be far better to give up his foolish notions of forcing the dead past to reveal its secret, and to wait patiently until Mildred was of age, when they could marry, and live happily ever after. It was all so simple, if he would only look at it in the right light! Mildred was quite of this opinion; she had ceased to question him as to the results of his investigations, and frequently wrote and spoke cheerfully and naturally of plans for their life together two years hence.

Captain Maitland, who up to the present had refused to acknowledge defeat, continued to search and to enquire; but even he was forced to admit (to himself alone) that it could not go on forever. "Let the lad alone," he would urge constantly. "Don't worry him. It will all come right," but in what way, even he would have been sorely puzzled to explain. In fact, he admitted as much to Mildred one

day early in March. They had just finished luncheon, and he was standing with his back to the fire in the hall at 'Trevor Lordship.' So thoroughly had the old man identified himself with his friends in their trouble that the strain of the past months of disappointment had left their mark on him. His shoulders were more bowed, his hair was a little whiter on his temples, but his kind blue eyes were just as clear and alert as ever.

"I can't understand it," he was saying. "I am perfectly certain that we have searched the history of every member of every expedition. Who in the world could the man have been? He can't have gone absolutely alone!"

"Perhaps he died out there," said Mildred.

They were never tired of discussing the matter, although every inch of the ground had been gone over many, many times before.

"Possibly, very possibly. But for some reason, which I don't attempt to explain even to myself, I can't believe it. I can give no reason for the faith which is in me!" he added, smiling.

Mildred returned his smile affectionately.

"No," she said. "But that doesn't matter. For my own part, I am quite sure that I don't care one way or the other. If I could only make dear old Jim see it in the same light; but I can't, so there's an end of it! It does seem so awfully hard on him!"

Meanwhile, Jim was riding along a country lane in Hertfordshire, thinking, as he always did think, of Mildred, and the waiting and hoping of which he was so utterly weary. Before people, oh, yes, he could appear cheery and courageous; but directly he was alone, the dark thoughts that hovered over him like birds of prey settled down upon him in a trice. He would do his level best to wrench his mind away from the subject, but seldom succeeded for more than a few moments at a time.

He had been down in the country to transact some business with a friend who was incapacitated by the result of an accident, and, as the weather seemed fair, and the roads hard and dry, had decided to ride the twenty miles or so back to London on his bicycle. The afternoon did not, however, look so promising as the earlier part of the day. Great masses of dark cloud swept up from the horizon, and the wind increased, rattling in the bare tree-tops with a menacing sound, sure presage of coming storm.

"Never mind!" he said to himself; "I'll push on to Barnet, or perhaps to Finchley, and go on by train from there. I ought to get to Barnet, with luck, before the rain comes."

But luck was apparently not attending him on this occasion, for he had hardly gone half a mile before he felt a sudden jerk, and became aware that there was something wrong with his machine. On exam-

ination he found the damage to be beyond his power to repair.

"What rotten luck!" he muttered angrily; "miles from anywhere, of course, and the nut gone!"

But since there was no help for it, he proceeded on foot, pushing the offending bicycle. At this juncture, the fickle jade Fortune seemed to have repented of her previous neglect of him, and decided to atone by giving him a little of her personal attention, for at the first turn of the road, he found himself entering a straggling village street, where several women stood chattering together. In reply to his question, one of them stepped forward.

"Young Tom at the forge, sir! He'll put it right for you. No, there ain't no bicycle shop here; but young Tom, he knows all about it. He's handy with them things, he is. Not that I hold with 'em myself, that I don't! My man, he got one, he did, and what must he do but go to fall off the very first time he rode it, and break his leg! Spiteful things I call 'em!"

Talking volubly, she led the way to the forge, where young Tom proved equal to her opinion of him.

"I can do it, sir," he said civilly; "but it will be a matter of a few minutes. I have got plenty of nuts, but I expect they won't just fit without a bit of coaxing."

Jim lit a cigarette, and was leaning against the doorpost idly watching the blacksmith as he laid out his tools, and prepared for work, when a form rose from a bench at the back of the low building, and a voice said: —

"Maybe, sir, you'd like to see the church while you're waiting?"

"Now, now, Grandfather," said young Tom, laughing. "You let the gentleman alone. He don't want to see no churches!"

"There be some fine monnyments! sir, and that be but a few steps!"

"Certainly I'll come," said Jim, cheerfully.

"He's that set on the church as never was," put in the woman. "He's been grave-digger for years and years, and now, being stiff with rheumatics, he can't dig any more, so Rector, he lets him sweep the yard and keep the place tidy."

Jim followed Grandfather's feeble footsteps through the gate hard by, and up the path. The little churchyard under its spreading elms was very tidy and well cared for, and he stopped once or twice to read the inscriptions on some of the older headstones.

"Sacred to the memory of Mister Joshua Roberts," so ran one of these, as if the deceased had been anxious that his name should be announced with all due formality at the Resurrection.

"See that there?" said the old man, with a chuckle.

"That's queer, that is! Folks often laugh at that. I mind the storm well!" On a small moss-grown stone were the words: —

> "Here lies Riched Gotobed
> Under the sod.
> Killed by a thunderbolt,
> Praise be to God!"

"Do you often have thunderbolts in these parts?" asked Jim.

"Well, I never mind but that one. That were a storm, that were. Farmer Terry, he had twelve cows killed down in the pasture yonder. See! where them two old trees stands, over there! There was a clump of seven or eight oaks there in them days, and the beasts they was all huddled under 'em. Dick Gotobed, he were a-walking across pasture for to drive 'em in, and the thunderbolt come, such a crack as never you heard, seemed as if the world was afire. I was standin' under the barn, a-watchin' of Dick, and when I looked again, there was the trees down right on top of the cows, and Dick lyin' on his face just where you see that white stone. Then down comes the rain, seemed as if you couldn't hardly call it rain, such as I never did see, nor never will, and when we picked 'im up, one side of 'im were black! black as a coal that were! Aye! that were a thunderbolt, sure enough. I don't ever want to see another! Seems as if we was goin' for to

get some rain now," he added, as he hobbled towards the church. "Folks say that seems queer, putting 'Praise be to God,' but that were his wife. 'Praise God Jane,' folks called her after that; not but what he were a good husband, Dick were, but she always would have it as how, whatever come, Almighty must be praised. John Collins, what were carpenter then, he wrote the verse, and Jane said, 'Put what you like, John, but Praise God, I will 'ave on 'is tombstone.' Come and see the monnyments, sir; fine monnyments they be."

He led Jim to the chancel, where two recumbent stone figures reclined in a most uncomfortable attitude on a great square tomb, and a tablet set forth in terms of highest eulogy the virtues of Peter Saunders, Knight, and Dame Elizabeth, his wife. They were of no particular interest, either artistic or historical; but the old man was so evidently proud of them, that Jim felt it his duty to admire and praise, and then, in obedience to his guide, walked to the other side, where a large tablet of black and white marble was set in the wall.

The carving represented a ship in full sail, stranded on large and very jagged blocks of ice; icicles hung from the rigging, and in the foreground a most realistic polar bear stood with raised head and wide-open jaws. A thrill of interest ran through Jim, and he stepped quickly closer to read the inscription: —

"Sacred to the memory of Gilbert Baine, who, with other intrepid souls on board the *Seagull*, perished in the Arctic Regions during the Winter of 1880–1881, A.D."

Underneath was the verse: —

"'Mid pastures green He'll lead His flock,
Where living streams appear.
And God the Lord from every eye
Shall wipe away the tear."

A black mist seemed to roll heavily before Jim's eyes for a moment; the letters danced like points of fire. 1880–1881; was it possible that here, in this out of the way place, he had stumbled on the clue which they had sought so diligently and so long? Then he pulled himself together. No! he told himself fiercely, there was probably nothing in it — just another will-o'-the-wisp beckoning to another barren chase! But it takes very little to fan the embers of hope into a flame, and he was breathing rather quickly as he turned to the old man and asked: —

"Do you know anything about Gilbert Baine?"

"Oh, aye, I knowed 'im. He were nephew to old Mrs. Hamilton what lived up at the Grange. Widow lady, she were. She hadn't no children, and set great store by Muster Gilbert, she did. Lor'! how she did take on when 'e went away; but then, as I said to 'er — young folks'll go same as young colts'll kick! But 'e never come back, and she put up the stone, and then, soon after, she died, and the place was sold to

Mr. Parker, what lives there now; come from London way, 'e did."

"Do people ever come to see the stone, or to make enquiries about it?"

"Well, now, to be sure, that do seem queer you should ask that, sir; for last summer there was a gentleman comed 'ere, stayin' in the neighbourhood, 'e said 'e was. 'E comed and asked to see the monnyments. Sort of interested, he was, like, and when he comed to this un, he just stood quite still for a long time, and then 'e said as how 'e thought pastures green and livin' streams would be just what them poor fellows would be most glad to find. I said as 'ow it might have been cold there" — he pointed with his thumb at the frozen scene. "'It was,' he said kind of quiet like; 'I know it was cold, for I was there.'"

"He was there?" faltered Jim.

"Oh, aye, 'e was there! 'Im and me we 'ad quite a long talk about it. Lame gentleman, he were, and quiet like."

"How long ago was it — did you say?"

"I remember they was carting hay down in the long meadow," replied the old man, pensively; "but I couldn't rightly say just what day that might a been."

"But you are sure it was last summer?"

"Yes; that were last summer, sure enough."

"Did you find out the gentleman's name?"

"I asked 'im what 'is name might be, sir; 'im and me we 'ad got kind of friendly like; and 'e give me a piece of paper before 'e went away. Maybe you'd like to see it? 'E did say as how 'e'd be comin' back one of these days. Seemed to take a sort of interest in the monnyments, 'e did."

Jim's replies to the old sexton's rambling talk were quite incoherent as they walked back to the forge, for he was hardly conscious of what he was saying. The old man entered the cottage, and from an old willow-patterned jug on the high mantel shelf produced a visiting card, which he handed to Jim.

It read: —

Commander John Seymour, R.N. (retired)
Oak Cottage, Marazion.

He copied the name carefully on to a slip of paper, and, mounting his bicycle, now repaired by the skilful hands of young Tom, rode away down the lane. It was raining now, but Jim little recked of the weather, as he pedalled furiously along, his head bent, and his hands gripping the handle-bars with a grasp of iron. His mind was a tumult of conflicting emotions, hope and fear alternately striving for the mastery. The last months had been so utterly devoid of hope! Here was at least a change from the deadly inaction. An expedition of which they had never even heard! — that meant at least a clue to be followed — and there was always a chance — a chance!

He stopped at the post-office at Barnet, and sent the following telegram to Captain Maitland.

Another chance. Come at once, do not tell Mildred.

JIM.

It was a recognized thing that all clues were to be followed up together, and the next afternoon found them both seated in a train whirling speedily along on their long journey to Penzance.

On the seat beside Captain Maitland was a square parcel wrapped in brown paper. It contained the old writing-desk, which always accompanied them on their expeditions, although up to the present matters had never reached the point where the recognition of it might have set a seal upon certainty.

"Don't build too much on this, my boy," the Captain urged kindly.

"It's all very well to say 'don't,'" replied Jim, quickly. "I do try not to. That is why I wired to you not to tell Mildred. I try not to think about it at all; but, old man, it is a chance! You can't say it isn't a chance!"

"Well, well, maybe! But there are a good many hours to be got through before we know the worst—"

"Or the best," interrupted Jim.

"Or the best—so go steady, my lad. Here, read this leading article; it's stiff enough to steady anyone! Read it straight through, every word! I refuse to discuss personal matters with you any more.

I'm going to sleep — Always sleep in the train — that's my motto!"

He leaned back in his corner and shut his eyes, but sleep refused to come at his bidding, and presently he opened them again, and glanced at the opposite corner of the carriage. Jim was leaning forward smoking furiously; he held the folded paper before him, but it was very evident that he was not reading. Every now and then he would raise his hand, and brush the hair back from his forehead with an impatient gesture. The Captain sighed. It was ridiculous for a man of Jim's age to develop nerves, but there was no doubt that he had got them, and got them badly. "It can't go on," he said to himself. "If this fails," — and with the caution of old age, he dared not entertain much hope, — "we'll have to tackle that old lady, or dispense with her permission, and get them married. After all, it is a great fuss about very little! Lots of men have not got fathers, and get on very well without them! The boy has taken it badly — but once get them married — then Mildred can do the rest. They can't wait another two years." Two years! An eternity to the young, but such a short time to the old, who have watched the wheels of time for so long, and know so well the pace at which they travel!

They arrived at Penzance at a little before midnight, and went straight to an hotel. The Captain,

wise in his generation, retired straight to his bed; but the younger man spent the remaining hours restlessly pacing up and down the sea front, under the starlit sky. After breakfast his impatience became painful to witness. In vain the Captain pointed out that it was impossible to descend upon a total stranger at nine o'clock in the morning; eleven was surely the earliest hour permissible! Finally it seemed cruel to restrain him, and they stepped into a fly to drive to the quiet village.

There was a delightful feeling of spring in the air, the sea was calm and blue, gentle waves just lapping the quiet sands with never a hint of turmoil or fret. In the distance, the Mount rose clear above the azure water, the sun striking golden gleams from the buildings on the summit. The soft hills on the left were girdled with faint mist which was rising from the marshy low-lying ground where the young osiers shone redly orange in the sunlight. The grey tower of the little church indicated where the village nestles among the sheltering trees.

The carriage stopped at a gate close to the church, and, passing under a low archway of yew, the two men walked up a short flagged path to the door of an old-fashioned, creeper-clad house. The bell was answered by an elderly woman servant, who said that Captain Seymour was at home; he was in the garden —would the gentlemen step inside, and she would

fetch him. They entered a small parlour with a low ceiling crossed with heavy oak beams; evidently a bachelor room, for a pair of slippers lay before the fire, and a neat row of pipes was arranged on a little table beside an ancient and comfortable arm-chair. The walls were covered with pictures, nautical in character, nearly all of ships or sea-scapes. On the mantelpiece was a sketch in pencil of a ship imprisoned among ice, and underneath was written, "Seagull, 1880." Next to it hung another drawing, very similar in character, marked "Alert, 1875." A large coloured engraving of the battle of the Nile occupied a prominent position on the opposite wall, over a small bookcase containing many volumes on exploration and travel.

Jim wandered round, feverishly picking up one trifle after another. The Captain stood upon the hearth-rug, carefully examining the lining of his hat, as if it contained some new and enthralling interest, while a clock in the corner ticked slowly and aggressively, as much as to say, "Don't be impatient; I shall certainly not hurry myself for you!" A few moments passed thus, and then the door opened, and a man came in. He was short and spare, and walked slowly and with difficulty, being exceedingly lame. He bowed.

"Good-morning," he said, glancing at the card in his hand, and moving forward as he spoke.

"I am afraid our visit must seem something in the nature of an intrusion," said Captain Maitland. "But learning by chance that you had been a member of an expedition to the Polar regions in 1880 or 1881, we have come to ask if you would be so kind as to give us some information."

"Pray be seated," was the courteous reply. "If you will question me, I will do my best to answer fully. What was it you wished to know?"

Jim walked to a small table which occupied the centre of the room, and, resting his hands upon it, leaned forward, and said: —

"I am searching for a man whose name I do not know — who sailed somewhere about 1880 on a ship the name of which I do not know — leaving a wife and a young child behind him."

Captain Seymour, who chanced to be standing immediately opposite to Jim, lifted his face suddenly; the light from the window shone full on them both, and Captain Maitland scanned the two faces earnestly for a few seconds.

"Well?"

"When this man — whose name I do not know — returned to England — if he did return — he found he could not trace either his wife or child — "

Jim's voice was not quite steady. Labouring as he was under intense excitement, he found it difficult to state his case clearly. Had any onlooker been pres-

ent, they might have thought Captain Maitland's behaviour curious, for after that one long look, he retired to a chair, where he sat down, and proceeded to unpack a parcel he had brought with him. Patiently untying the knots, he twisted the string with care and neatness into a small hank, which he carefully placed in his pocket, and from the brown paper he drew the desk, and, rising, placed it in the centre of the table. Then he quietly resumed his seat. The other men did not seem to notice his movements, and Jim continued: —

"Do you know — have you heard a similar story connected with any one who sailed with you?"

"What is your reason for asking?" demanded Captain Seymour, slowly.

"Because — I have reason to believe — that — he was my father!"

The elder man swayed for a moment where he stood; then, drawing a chair close to the table, he sat down, and covered his eyes with his hand. For some moments silence reigned in the little room, broken only by the ticking of the clock. At last Captain Seymour spoke.

"I have heard a similar story," he said. "Please tell me the details."

"On December 12, 1880," — Jim spoke more quickly now, his heart was thumping painfully, — "two people, Mr. and Mrs. Lucas, were staying in a

certain hotel in London. During the night there was a fire close by — a child was saved — a child of three or four years — a boy —" he hesitated. "There — were no other survivors. They adopted the child, and brought him up as their own. He only learnt the truth a few months ago. I — am the boy —! and I am — looking for — my — father."

The man moved slightly, but did not uncover his face.

"Proofs?" he said, in a low, hoarse voice.

"I have no proofs — only this desk, and one unfinished letter."

Jim opened the desk; he took out the sheet of paper and pushed it across the table. Captain Seymour's face was ashen white, but no whiter than Jim's, which had grown haggard and strangely old in the last few minutes. With trembling hands he fumbled for his spectacles, and put them on; then he took the letter in his hand, and read it slowly through. Once — twice — then a sharp cry broke from his lips. "Mary!" — and he dropped his head upon his folded arms.

Jim stood as if carved in stone; his eyes fixed upon the bowed head opposite him. The leaden seconds passed — the clock ticked with ponderous deliberation — somewhere outside a dog barked furiously.

Then the man rose to his feet — he glanced round

him as if uncertain of his surroundings — then his eyes met Jim's, met them, and held them for one long, pregnant moment. Suddenly he stretched out both his hands.

"Mary's boy—" he faltered. "My son! My son!"

CHAPTER XXVII

AN OLD STORY

"One day with life and heart
Is more than time enough to find a world."

— LOWELL.

NEARLY two hours later Jim walked across the lawn at the back of the cottage, and found Captain Maitland sitting in a wicker arm-chair, smoking his pipe in peaceful, contemplative fashion.

"Old friend," he said, laying his hand on the Captain's shoulder with an impulsive, boyish gesture, "Old friend, it's all right! But come in — I can't do without you — I can't try to thank you — I can't say what I feel, but God knows what I should have done without you! Come into the house — there is so much to say and to hear. He really is a dear old boy, but he's naturally awfully bowled over by the suddenness of it all. Who wouldn't be? Wait a second until I send that driver chap back with a couple of telegrams!"

He returned in a few minutes, and they walked together into the parlour. Captain Seymour was still sitting by the table; his face was very pale, and bore

evident signs of recent emotion. He held out his hand as Captain Maitland entered.

"Come in," he said. "The boy has told me something of your part in the story, but it isn't all clear to me yet. It seems so extraordinary! A return from the grave after so many years!" . . .

"Won't you tell us something of your side of it?" suggested Captain Maitland. "How was it that you never knew —?"

"I will try and begin at the beginning. I first met my wife when I was stationed at Esquimalt, in British Columbia. Her name was Mary Robertson, and she was living with an uncle and aunt. Her uncle was an Englishman who had a big ranch near Lytton, but, owing to failing health, he was living down at the coast. When we became engaged to be married, I was on the point of resigning my commission; I was deeply interested in Arctic exploration, always had been; and it was my fixed intention to join a friend of mine who was preparing an expedition to start from San Francisco. He was an American whom I had known almost from boyhood, and it was an old promise that I should go with him whenever he was ready to go. Mary knew this, and, being full of courage, she did not attempt to dissuade me. We were married in 1874, November 26, it was. Our boy was born on December 10, 1876, and very soon after that the old uncle was

killed by a fall from his horse, and his wife died soon after.

"During these years, I had made several visits to America, and our preparations were almost complete. After the death of the old people, we moved to San Francisco, and finally I sailed with the *Seagull* expedition in July, 1879. The year before, this cottage had been left me by an old cousin, who was my sole relative; in fact, both my wife and I were singularly alone in the world, which of course made matters more difficult later. It was arranged that Mary should come back to England, and live here during my absence, — she felt it was my home; I had lived here as a boy.

"The story of the expedition can be told another time; it was a wretched tragedy! We got into heavy pack ice, and were held fast for twenty-two long months. Poor Fisher, my friend, and the leader of the party, died there, and many others; the *Seagull* was crushed and sunk in June, 1880. We managed to drag our boats over the ice, and those that were left of us reached Bennett's Island about a month or six weeks later.

"September of the same year found us at the New Siberian Islands, and from there we set out in three boats for the mouth of the Lena. We met rough weather, our boats were separated, and finally only one, with three men alive, reached Irkutsk: Cray-

shaw, the second officer, one of the crew named Dawson, and myself. Dawson died a few days later, and Crayshaw only lived three weeks. I had got a wound on my leg which had been open for months, and when at last I managed to get hold of a doctor, it had to be amputated, and it was a long job. It was six months before I was able to move, and then I fell ill just as I was starting for home, and was raging with fever for ever so long. I had sent repeated letters to my wife, but had no answer; and my anxiety with regard to her increased every day, and materially retarded my recovery. Then, as soon as I was better, came a rumour that some of the crew of our other boat had been heard of, and I felt bound to wait for confirmation of the report. It wasn't true.

"At last, but not until the spring of 1882, I reached England. I came straight down here, and found only the two old servants who had lived with my cousin. They had never heard of Mary!

"The next few months were a ghastly nightmare! I hurried to San Francisco, where I found a few letters from her, the latest written in October, 1876, when she had left there. Later than that she was to write to a place up north, where we hoped to touch on our return journey. One of our acquaintances had received a letter from her, posted in Liverpool, announcing her safe arrival in England, and — and

after that, they had heard nothing! I went on to Victoria, and there an old friend of Mary's had also had a letter from Liverpool, but nothing later."

"Did you ever get any letters from the place up north?" asked Jim.

"No, nothing! I account for that by the fact that there was no chance of our being there for many months, and probably Mary thought it would hardly have been worth while posting until later."

"This unfinished letter mentions a budget," said Captain Maitland; "so that was probably it. Did you advertise?"

"Yes, I advertised; but I don't suppose that any one but Mary would have understood; you see — I was so sure she was alive — for years I couldn't believe that she was dead. Then I came down here, and was very ill again from time to time — ill and despairing!"

"How was it," asked Captain Maitland, "that this expedition does not seem to have been reported in any of the papers? Nor does it seem to have been mentioned in the reports of the Geographical Society."

"Well," replied Captain Seymour, "I think I can understand that. It was really a private venture; Fisher was a rich man, and practically financed it himself, and he was always particular that the reporters should not get hold of any information about

him or the voyage. You know what the American Press is! It ended in his having quite a row with the newspaper men. I know, however, that they did report his death and the loss of the *Seagull*, and they also had a paragraph about my return."

"Were there several Englishmen on board?" enquired Jim.

"Only three. Crayshaw, Baine, and myself. The others were American, Canadian, Norwegian — a mixed crew. Good men, though! They deserved a better fate."

"I can't see now," said Jim, presently, "why you didn't happen to see any of the advertisements. I don't mean the ones in 1880, of course — but we have been advertising for months!"

"I seldom see the London daily papers. I take in the weekly 'Times,' and the local paper, and one or two magazines; have done so for years. When I first came home, I hunted in every newspaper I could lay my hands on, but after awhile I gave it up in despair. For years I haven't looked at an advertisement column."

"I can understand that," said Captain Maitland. "I never read them myself until lately."

"It is curious that you should have traced me at last through that memorial to poor Baine."

"I only saw it quite by chance," said Jim. "My bicycle broke down, and while I was waiting for it

to be repaired, the old sexton begged me to go into the church."

"I was staying with an old shipmate of mine close by, last summer. One afternoon we were all sitting at tea, and the conversation turned on Arctic voyages, and some one asked me what was the name of my vessel. It so happened that the daughter of the rector of North Mead was there. 'The *Seagull*,' she exclaimed. 'Why, that was the name of Gilbert Baine's ship.' 'It was,' I replied. 'Did you know him?' And then she explained. 'How slight a chance may raise or sink a soul.'"

Captain Maitland capped the quotation — "'Or that power which erring men call chance,'" he said, quietly.

"Aye!" said Captain Seymour, thoughtfully, and for a few minutes no one spoke. He was holding the letter in his hand, and sat gazing at it. Then he roused himself. "This desk was a wedding present to my mother. Do you see that scratch?" he asked with a smile. "I did that with my first pen-knife." Then, rising, he opened a cupboard, and took from it a miniature. "This was your mother," he said, handing it to Jim. "That picture was with me all the time —"

A young face smiled up at Jim from the ivory, gaily, happily, with no hint of tragedy or loss. His mother, and a stranger! And, as he looked at it,

he thought of another face, older, plainer, it was true, but one whose every look had been loving and devoted — the only mother he had ever known!

"You have your mother's eyes," said his father.

"But your face," said Captain Maitland, quickly. "The likeness between you is extraordinary."

"When will you come, sir," asked Jim, "to see my — Mr. and Mrs. Lucas?"

"Whenever you will. To-morrow, if you like," was the reply.

"And Mildred," continued Jim. "I have telegraphed. I know you will like her — I am sure you will."

Captain Seymour stood up.

"My boy!" he said kindly, laying his hand on Jim's shoulder. "Chance or — let us be plain and honest in our gratitude — God has brought you to me. You have lived many years without me; your life lies before you; circumstances of which I have no knowledge have laid it in lines of which I know nothing. Kind souls I do not know have been your parents in fact, if not in truth. Any affection you can give me in the future I will take with thankfulness, for I am a lonely man, and need it sorely; but, understand me, I make no claims! Thinking matters over, as I have thought them over continuously for twenty years, I have come to see that I did your mother and you a grievous wrong. I should never have left her, or you."

"But she was willing," Jim said, trying to speak a comforting word.

"Aye! she was willing, brave soul! but that did not alter the wrong. It was not as if it was my duty to go — merely pleasure — the love of adventure — a purely selfish thing. I did wrong. God knows I have paid the price in years of loneliness and remorse. But now that I have found my son, to whom I have never been a father — one thing at least is clear to me. I have no claims — no right to advise or direct. I will not interfere." He held up his hand with a gesture of silence, as Jim tried to interrupt. "I will not interfere, I promise you, or be a burden in any way. But I must see Mr. and Mrs. Lucas, — at once, if may be, — if only to make known to them the fact that you must still be theirs — for they are old, and need you, and you owe them much. And I must see your Mildred — "

"You left a son," interposed Captain Maitland, kindly, "but now you have found not only a son, but a daughter."

Captain Seymour smiled.

"Let us go, then, at once. We will go to-morrow."

"Are you sure that you are equal to the journey, sir?" asked Jim, quickly, for indeed his newly found father looked very frail and ill.

"Quite equal!" he responded stoutly. "Your coming has given me new life. A lame dog, it is

true, but a live one for all that! How I can now thank God that in His infinite wisdom He did not answer my prayers! For years I have prayed to go, and now — I only pray He may grant me a few more years to know my son!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTER THE WEDDING

"There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms."
— GEORGE ELIOT.

AND so, after days of storm and stress, the course of true love did at last run smooth; and in April, when all the earth had donned her fairest, freshest green, when the daffodils were waving in the sunlight, and the birds were singing merrily, Mildred and Jim were married in the little church at 'Trevor Lordship.'

Spring smiled on them, and the weather was such as permitted the reporter of the local paper to commence his description of the wedding with the customary line, "Happy is the bride the sun shines on!" The want of originality in this opening phrase was amply atoned for by a particularly flowery paragraph further on, in which he stated that "the bride looked charming in a gown of white satin duchesse, richly adorned with Brussels 'point to point!'" His fancy fairly ran riot in superfluous verbosity over the guests, the bridesmaids, and the wedding presents, and soared to a striking flight in the closing sentence, which read, "The happy pair left amid a hurricane of rice and a storm of vociferous cheers, to spend the

honeymoon at Marazion, the country seat of the bridegroom's family." This elegant burst of rhetoric was read aloud to the assembled party at 'Trevor Lordship,' a few days after the wedding, and caused much amusement.

Many of our old friends were seated on the lawn, enjoying a foretaste of summer in the brilliant sunshine which flickered through the young green of the chestnut-tree and fell upon the white carpet of fallen blossoms beneath it. The old house stood bathed in the golden light, which lit up the mellow tones of the ancient brickwork and stone, and fell full on a corner of the wall where the peacock sunned himself in all his arrogant pride. The fountain murmured a gentle accompaniment to the chattering of the rooks in the elm-trees, who, with the return of spring, were once more noisily occupied with the cares of a new generation.

Miss Price was seated in her favourite wicker chair. The mushroom hat, which apparently defied the hand of time, and survived all changes of the seasons, was firmly tied under her chin, and her hands were clasped round the handle of her stick. Her shrewd, kindly glance rested first upon one and then another, as the ball of conversation was kept merrily rolling; but it always returned to and remained longer with Eleanor, who was sitting nearly opposite to her. It appeared that her scrutiny was

not altogether satisfactory to her, for invariably, as she watched her friend, a little frown showed itself on her forehead, and twice she murmured testily, "Chut! Chut!" under her breath.

"Certainly," she said to herself, "Eleanor is thinner, much thinner. Not but what it suits her, it really does; but why should she be thinner? She looks pale, too; but perhaps that is because she is wearing white. Now! why should she be pale and thin?" Her kind heart pondered over the question, although her cogitations were unobservable. "Is it because that poor man is dead, I wonder? Surely it can't be that! No! it must be because poor Sir Henry seems to be possessed of a dumb devil so far as she is concerned; — and yet — he watches her all the time. Look at him now! His eyes never leave her. I wonder! I must find out. Oh, dear! How I should like to shake that man! He does want it so badly!"

Joan's voice roused her from her meditations.

"I did like being a bridesmaid," the child was saying. "But I felt all the time I should so much rather have been the bride! Oh! I should like to be married soon!"

"You must wait a little while," said Captain Maitland, smiling.

"Yes, I suppose I must wait until some one asks me," Joan returned, with a sigh. "But I do hope it

will be soon. I should like to have a lot of presents, and cut the cake!"

"Wouldn't a birthday do as well?" asked Sir Henry.

"No," said Joan, decidedly. "Birthdays are much duller. You don't have orange blossoms or bridesmaids, or nothing; and after they are over, you go on just the same as if you hadn't had one. Now, if I was married, I should go away with Jim and live in a teeny-weeny house, and pour out the tea, and have visiting cards, and —"

"Have to order the dinner, and darn your husband's socks!" put in Minnie Ross, laughing.

"Oh, my husband will only have one leg," said Joan, decidedly. "I can knit, and I can turn the heel, but I can't make two feet the same size; so I must marry a man with only one leg."

"I don't think a one-legged husband would be altogether a treasure," laughed Minnie.

"I daresay not," Joan replied, calmly. "But then, husbands always are tiresome; at least, so Mrs Dobbs says, and she has had three, so she ought to know. She says they're like clothes. They give a lot of trouble, but you have to have them."

Mrs. Lucas, who had been perusing a pile of papers, suddenly asked: —

"Now, which would you choose? Plain or coloured?"

The old lady's whole time and attention were

occupied with lists of furniture and household requisites for the plenishing of Jim's new home, and she had been entirely oblivious of the foregoing conversation.

"Bless me!" ejaculated Miss Price, in surprise.

Minnie's husband roused himself from his comfortable position at his pretty wife's feet.

"Well," he said seriously, "opinions vary. In some climates coloured are preferred, black and woolly; but personally, if I were a young lady, I should choose, not necessarily plain, but most decidedly white!"

"What does the man mean?" asked Mrs. Lucas, in mild surprise. "I was talking of drawing-room curtains!"

"Here comes Captain Seymour," said Sir Henry, suddenly. "Now Joan, no more talk about one-legged men, whatever you do."

"Of course not," said Joan, loftily. "But I know he wouldn't mind, because I asked him all about it; a bear had his other leg for dinner!"

"Lady Trevor," said Captain Seymour, as he limped into the circle under the tree, "I don't think I have ever seen a more beautiful garden than you have here, or more magnificent trees!"

"It is lovely, isn't it? And this part of the country is noted for its elms," answered Eleanor.

"Do you live here all the year round, Lady Trevor?" asked Maud King.

She was a friend of Mildred's, who had acted as one of her bridesmaids.

"Yes, all the year; and it is always beautiful."

"I have loved my visit here," continued the girl. "It has been delicious, but, do you know — I don't think I could bear to live in the country all the year round!"

"Why not, Miss King?" asked Sir Henry.

"Well — I do love London. You are right in the middle of everything."

"Oh, yes!" agreed Miss Price. "Skating on the surface, with a strong predilection for the thinnest ice!"

"Oh, no!" cried the girl. "I don't mean that a bit! It is just the skating on the surface which is so horrid. I want to get right inside! The country seems such a backwater of life, somehow."

"I used to think so," said Minnie. "But I am not sure that I do now."

"Some of us prefer the backwater," said Captain Seymour.

"Yes," agreed Miss Price; "some of us do. But life in the country isn't necessarily life in a backwater. It need not be."

"Ah!" said Eleanor, quickly. "But it often is!"

"It seems to me," said Captain Maitland, joining in the discussion, "that people differ. So much depends on whether you are conscious of the rapid

stream beyond. Everything goes by comparisons, doesn't it?"

"One may live for years and know nothing of the stream beyond," replied Eleanor, thoughtfully.

"Some of us have known it," put in Miss Price; "and, as Captain Seymour says, choose the backwater — which, after all, need not be stagnant."

"But others know nothing of it," repeated Eleanor.

"Yes!" agreed Miss King, eagerly. "That is just it! I am not thinking of people who have known life, but of those who live without knowing it! Personally, I would rather be in the strongest part of the stream."

"That is the modern spirit," Miss Price said kindly, "and the spirit of youth."

"That may be. But just think," urged the girl, "how much people miss by never knowing the heart of things. It is difficult for me to explain what I mean; but somehow one would hate just drifting! It may be easier; it probably is; but," she added seriously, "I, for one, would rather have the bruises than be right out of the battle — when there are so many to fight for. To do something worth doing, and feel something worth feeling — that is the main thing. A friend of mine wrote some lines about it the other day, which are just what I feel. She named them, 'The Cry of the Strenuous.'"

"Will you repeat them?" asked Eleanor.

"'If we may not succeed, and attain our ambition,
And hear sometime critics acclaim and applaud,
We would rather go down 'mid their jeers and derision
Than in silence. Ignored!

"'If we may not know Love in its uttermost splendour,
To ask all — to yield all — to find our soul's mate,
The Love that nor prices, nor grudges surrender!
We would rather know Hate!!

"'If we may not know Life, the Life that's worth living,
To taste of her fulness, draw breath of her breath!
To steep heart and soul in her — taking and giving!
We would rather know Death!!

"'If we may not be there where the quick volleys rattle,
Take part in the strife, be it triumph or rout,
If we may not be ranked in the van of the battle—
Ah! Dear God! — Put us out!!'"

"Frankly Pagan!" commented Captain Seymour, after a pause.

"Is it?" queried Eleanor. "I am not sure! Of course all that part about 'death' and 'going out' is all wrong. No one can throw up the sponge because they can't have what they want — but I think that a great deal of it is absolutely true. The part about what we crave for! It is silence, inaction, inanition, which are unbearable! One must go for the very best, and — when once one realizes what it is, it must be that or nothing. The very fulness of Life and Love — I am sure that is what God meant us to have. 'The life that's worth living'! — 'the taking and giving'! — that is perfectly true! That is the thing

that matters! Without it we are crippled, and drop out — wounded — without ever having struck a blow!"

Sir Henry's eyes were fixed upon his wife. Her face was flushed and earnest, and there was a note of passion in her voice, very different from her usual level tone.

"That is not affected by town or country," said Miss Price, rather lightly, rising as she spoke. She seemed anxious to change the subject. "Come, Eleanor, let us go for a stroll. My old bones get stiff with sitting, and it is none too warm."

Eleanor rose at once. She had quickly regained her composure, and replied quietly:—

"Come along! Let us go across the park to the beech wood."

They walked in silence for some moments, and then Miss Price said:—

"You have a large party here, Eleanor; but I miss one face."

"Ah! Poor Mr. Bolding," replied Eleanor, quickly. "We all miss him very much; especially Joan, I think. The child was devoted to him."

"He was very fond of you."

"I know. I liked him so much, and so did Henry. There have been so many losses lately in this dreadful war. Yet — I think it is what he would have wished himself, — he died most gallantly in action.

I think he was one of those who wanted to be right in the van of the battle. But we all miss him terribly."

Miss Price gave an audible sigh. It might have been sympathy, but it sounded more like relief.

"You will miss Mildred too, now that she is married. It will make a difference in your life."

"It will make a great difference to Joan! But after all — Mildred will be happy."

"What are you going to do?" said Miss Price, abruptly.

She stopped suddenly as she spoke, and looked straight at Eleanor. For a moment Eleanor's habitual reserve failed her, or perhaps she had not entirely regained her self-control.

"Do?" she repeated almost bitterly. "Do? Why, nothing! What can I do, except go on?"

Miss Price laid a hand kindly on her arm.

"Eleanor," she said gently, "do not allow yourself to get bitter! Bitterness is the refuge of fools! It never did anything but harm. You are making a great mistake."

"I am not making a mistake — now," said Eleanor, more quietly; "I am reaping the harvest of a great mistake."

"Not a bit of it!" retorted Miss Price. "You are making a mistake now."

"I have done everything," she said passionately.

"But it is no good! However, you are right. It is no use being bitter. I must just learn to do without."

"You think he does not care?" asked Miss Price, very kindly.

Eleanor hesitated.

"How can I think otherwise? He does not want any more — than he has — his home — and his books."

"His books!" echoed Miss Price. "I have been here a week, and he has never stayed in his library for half an hour at a time!"

"There have been guests. Don't let us talk about it any more, dear friend; and don't worry your kind heart about me. I must just go on, and learn to be content. I am going away to-morrow, after you all leave. I am going to take Joan to the sea for a fortnight. We are going to Renwick. I am sure she wants a breath of sea air; she is growing fast, and I haven't been very happy about her lately. I think she felt the shock of the accident last autumn more than we thought at the time, and just now late hours and excitement have not done her any good."

"It will do you good, too," returned Miss Price. "I should like to see you with a little more colour. I expect you have been over-tired with the bustle of the wedding, especially after the strain of so many months of uncertainty. It is wonderful to think how things have come out right in the end. It is very hard to have patience, but they do come right."

Eleanor made no reply.

CHAPTER XXIX

PLAIN SPEAKING

"Truth has rough flavours if we bite it through."
—GEORGE ELIOT.

SEVERAL of the wedding guests left early the next morning, but Miss Price was not among them; she had, so she told Eleanor, made up her mind to go no further than Peterborough that day, as she had a cousin there whom she had not seen for many years, and she thought she would go to an hotel for the night, and pay her a visit on the following day.

"So, in order to avoid a long evening in a strange place, my dear, with your kind permission, I will not leave here until the six o'clock train."

"By all means," replied Eleanor. "Only—I am afraid I am going earlier. I am so sorry. I would put off going until to-morrow, but I am afraid Joan would be so disappointed."

"Don't think of altering your plans for me!" said Miss Price. "I wouldn't allow it for a moment. Sir Henry will look after me, I am sure, if he will be at home, and at leisure."

"With pleasure," answered Sir Henry. "Would you care for a drive this afternoon?"

"No, thank you," said the old lady. "I will just sit happily in the garden, and you shall tell me all about your new book, and when we are to expect it."

"I am afraid it has not progressed lately. I must atone for past idleness now that the wedding is over."

"I wish you were coming to Renwick, Uncle Henry," said Joan. "Do come! and we will build sand castles, and paddle, and have great fun."

"You would find me rather a dull playfellow," he answered, smiling. "Ah! here is Minnie, all ready to start."

Minnie appeared, looking extremely charming in her smart travelling-suit.

"Wherever is Hugh?" she asked. "I am sure he hasn't had his medicine, and I told him he was to take it before he started! He really is too tiresome!"

Sir Henry smiled. Minnie's solicitude about her tall husband was pretty to see.

"Hugh is really much stronger, isn't he? His looks certainly do credit to your nursing."

"Oh, yes, he is much better; but he isn't fit yet, and I do want him to be quite strong. Oh! there you are!" she added, as Major Ross's stalwart form appeared in the doorway. "Come along this minute! Have you had your medicine? That's all right! Where have you been? The carriage will be round directly!"

Minnie stood in front of him, and, rising on tiptoe,

rearranged the silk scarf which was already folded neatly round his neck, and gave him sundry little pats; at which he laughed, and then put his arm through hers with a gesture of affection and mutual understanding, and said,—

"All serene, eh! What a fussy little woman it is!"

"How long are you going to be in England?" asked Miss Price.

"My leave is up next month. I rejoin the regiment at Gibraltar; and Minnie is coming too. aren't you, Min?"

"I'm coming," she said, smiling. "I can't trust you alone again;" but there was a tone in her voice which belied the flippancy of her words.

"Have you broken it to our mother?" asked Sir Henry.

"No, not yet. But I shall to-night. Perhaps she will come too."

"Perhaps!" echoed her husband, with a deliberate wink, which made every one laugh outright.

"Here's the carriage," said Minnie. "Where are Eleanor and Joan?"

But at this moment they descended the staircase. Joan was clasping a very highly coloured tin bucket, and Alphonse Daudet trotted behind, proudly carrying a wooden spade in his mouth.

"Look at my bucket!" cried Joan, excitedly. "Look at my beautiful bucket. Dobbs got it for

me. Oh, Dobbs!" she added, as she espied him on the box seat, "thank you so much! It's perfectly lovely!" Dobbs touched his hat with a smile. "Oh, Aunt Eleanor! Don't you wish Dobbs was coming too? I am sure he would dig beautifully."

Eleanor kissed Miss Price warmly.

"Good-bye," she said. "Do come and see us again soon. I have hardly seen anything of you this time."

"I'll come," returned the old lady, "as soon as ever you want me. Good-bye, my dear." Then she whispered, "Be of good courage. Remember — all will come right."

Eleanor took her seat next to Minnie, while Sir Henry captured the excited Daudet, who was capering about and barking wildly, and placed him on Joan's lap. Then he turned to his wife.

"Have you everything?" he asked. "Where is Wilson?"

"Wilson has gone on with the luggage. Yes, I think we have everything."

"Let me hear of your safe arrival. Telegraph me to-night." He laid his hand on hers. "You will telegraph, won't you?"

Her reply was lost in the tumult, as Joan strove in vain to quiet her dog, and only encouraged him to further and yet more noisy yapping. Another moment, and the carriage was disappearing down the drive.

"What a noise!" laughed Miss Price, as they turned into the house. "Now, if you are busy, pray do not consider me. I have letters to write this morning, and after luncheon I shall hope for your company."

"Certainly," Sir Henry replied courteously. "Are you sure you will not like a drive, or do you prefer the garden this afternoon?"

"Oh, I prefer the garden," said the old lady, decidedly. "The garden, and intellectual conversation."

He smiled as he waited for her to pass to the foot of the stairs. "Au revoir," he said; and then he walked away to the library.

Miss Price retired to her room, but the excuse of letters to write seemed to have been a polite fiction, as she at once took a chair, and sat down by the open window.

"A hotel in Peterborough!" she said to herself, with a sniff of disapproval, as she looked round the well-appointed bedroom. "Never mind, it will only be for one night! And it is quite true I have a cousin in Peterborough, but — as to paying her a visit? I doubt it! She and I have done vastly well without each other for years; we always quarrelled when we did meet! But she has been useful for once in her life, and I am grateful to her for the first time. She gave me a valid excuse for a change in my plans. I have succeeded so far, but the next step

is far more difficult. Probably I am a fool. I know that, but nevertheless my mind is made up."

It was Miss Price's fixed intention to act in direct contradiction to the principles of a lifetime. She was going to interfere. She had arrived at this decision during the previous night, when she had spent several hours pondering over the situation. She had, up to the present, prided herself on "minding her own business" exclusively, but she realized that this excellent precept may be carried to excess, and can be, as it frequently is, just an excuse which we offer to ourselves for leaving undone something which is distasteful to us. It is one thing to pry into another's private affairs, but it is another to give a word of warning to a fellow-creature who is heading straight for a precipice; and this was, in her opinion, exactly what Sir Henry was doing. Therefore she had decided to delay her departure, in order to have an hour's undisturbed conversation with him.

"After luncheon will be the best time. There is no sense to be got out of a hungry man. I will just sit here with my knitting until the time arrives."

The old lady was never one to beat about the bush; she preferred a direct attack, and never wasted time. Accordingly when, some two hours later, they left the dining-room, and Sir Henry had, with her permission, lighted a cigar, she led the way into the garden, and, also, into action!

"Sir Henry," she said, without any preamble, "you may be surprised when I tell you that I delayed my departure on purpose to have a talk with you. And now, by your leave, we will go straight to the heart of the matter. Do you know what is wrong with Eleanor?"

"With Eleanor?" he repeated, completely taken by surprise.

"Yes, with Eleanor! I am, as you know, her oldest friend, and I am also, I think, old enough to claim the privilege of what some people might call interference. A certain license may be accorded to me, as an old woman who, as an interested spectator, sees very clearly all the points of the game; points which are often entirely overlooked by the players themselves. I think also that you and I are sufficiently good friends for you to realize that I am not acting without a purpose, or without due reflection. Eleanor is not really ill — but she is very unhappy."

"I know it," he said quietly.

"Very well, then! If you know it, why do you let it go on?"

"I? I would do anything in the world for her happiness!"

"Come and sit down on this seat, and answer me another plain question. This is a time for plain speaking. Do you care for your wife? Really care, I mean? Not the tepid, half-hearted affection which

was all you offered her when she married you. — If Eleanor had been wise, she would have flung it back in your face! — But something much more than that?"

Sir Henry raised his head, and met her anxious look of scrutiny fair and square.

"I love her with all my heart and soul," he said slowly, and perfectly distinctly.

"Very well, then. What is the trouble?"

"The fault is mine, and mine alone. Your words are hard, but they are absolutely just. The half-hearted affection of two years ago, and since then — I have thought — I have feared that I was too late. That she did not care for me at all."

A sudden light broke upon Miss Price.

"You mean that you thought she cared for some one else?"

Sir Henry nodded assent.

"And now?"

"I do not know. You see — when he was killed — I thought Eleanor would feel it so much — I hardly liked to tell her —"

"And she didn't?"

"No, she didn't. She was sorry —"

"Of course she was sorry — so was every one. And then —?"

"And then — I have been waiting —"

"Now, one more question; and then I have finished. You say that you love your wife earnestly and

truly. Well — has it ever struck you to tell her so?"

Sir Henry did not answer for a moment. Then he faltered, —

"But — She must —"

"Listen to me," said the old lady, earnestly. "Eleanor married you after years of waiting; years in which the best in her had been stunted and repressed by a life of ceaseless monotony, ceaseless unselfishness, and constant thought for others. Then you came along, and what do you do? You bring her here, to act as housekeeper, — which, by the way, she does admirably, — you think that, having given her a comfortable home, you have done all that is necessary! You have gone your own way without any thought for her. Wait a minute!" she added, as he tried to speak; "bear with me a little longer. Eleanor was asleep — drugged in heart and mind to a state of inanition — but now she is awake! Surely you can see that for yourself. You heard her speak yesterday! Of course she is unhappy!"

Sir Henry rose suddenly; he took one or two rapid turns up and down the gravel path. Then he stopped in front of Miss Price, who was waiting for him to speak. When he did so, the words came rapidly, in a tone very unlike his usual quiet way of speaking.

"Can you understand," he said, "that a man may

come to despise himself so utterly for blind selfishness, that when his eyes are opened — he hesitates? You see, I see so plainly now, that I deserve nothing at her hands; and I have been a coward. I could not face the thought of losing what I now have — the sight of her face — her sweet companionship. For I know that — if she cannot forgive me — if she does not want me — then — it means the end of everything for me."

"Well," said Miss Price, rising as she spoke, "if you want my advice, it is this. Go and tell her what you have told me, and see what she says!"

"I will!" he replied quickly. "I will go at once!"

"Excellent! And don't bear a grudge against me for my plain speaking," Miss Price said, smiling.

"I shall not do that," he assured her, "in any case. I hardly dare to hope — but I shall know soon."

"Oh, yes! you will know soon!" agreed Miss Price, with a twinkle in her eye which was more akin to tears than laughter.

CHAPTER XXX

AT LAST

"I think we had the chief of all love's joys
Only in knowing that we love each other."
— GEORGE ELIOT.

IT was two days later, and Sunday evening. Eleanor had seen little Joan safely tucked up in bed, and then, wrapping a lace scarf round her head and shoulders, she had strolled out on to the now deserted esplanade of the little seaside town. Here she had found a seat in a sheltered corner, and sat communing with her own thoughts.

The sea lay before her, calm and serene; the brilliant moon was reflected in one straight path of glory to her feet; the myriad stars looked down from the sapphire vault above; and as she gazed up at them, a recollection of a verse of her childhood came into her mind, "Little pin pricks into Heaven, just to let the glory through!"

All was very calm and very still. Now and again the sound of voices came from the houses which clustered on the cliff just above, or the faint echo of the organ rolled across the silence from the old church where the evening service was just coming to an end,

to die away again, and only the gentle lapping of the wavelets advancing and retreating on the moonlit sand remained, an echo of the everlasting music of the sea. Monsieur Alphonse Daudet had exhausted himself by chasing shadows in the moonlight, and now lay curled up in a soft, warm ball, in the folds of her gown.

Eleanor had, of late, endeavoured to avoid all thought, to erect a barrier round her inmost heart, which even she herself should not pass, to resume the attitude of placid insensibility which had served her so well for so many years, before it had been rudely disturbed by the advent of Love, which had come to her, not gently or kindly, but in a wave of emotion, and stress of feeling, leaving her, high and dry, on a barren and solitary rock, tortured with longing, and racked with vain regrets.

To-night, however, this barrier no longer existed. The conversation under the chestnut-tree, and her subsequent outburst of confidence to her old friend, had crumbled it to dust, and all the work of months, and all the effort of will which had gone to the building of it, were rendered void and useless. To-night her heart lay bare and bleeding, without veil or protection, and Eleanor was engaged in the painful task of probing and dissecting, with a view to ascertaining exactly its condition, and of finding, if possible, some method of healing. For wounds are unsightly, and

cannot be permitted to remain untended or ignored, lest the whole body suffer, and the very mainspring of life be broken.

In the last twenty-four hours she had come to realize that, as Miss Price had said, she was making a mistake, — not indeed in the way that Miss Price had intended the words to be understood, — but a mistake, nevertheless. It was no use trying to erect futile barriers, and trying to ignore facts as they existed. It was merely a position of moral cowardice. Life had got to be lived, and faced, and made the very best of, and it was time that she shook herself free from the past, and set herself bravely to pick up the pieces of her dream, lest they cumber her feet, and start out again along the appointed road. If it was to be lonely, well, that could not be helped. Repining was useless and unprofitable. And so she began to systematically review the influences and changes which had led her to where she now stood, and in the relief of at last letting her thoughts have full and unfettered freedom she laid her soul open to the calming influence of the moonlight and the soothing power of the night.

She thought first of her brief courtship in far-off, half forgotten days, of Hal's departure, of the busy, monotonous life with her parents in her girlhood's home, and so on, step by step, to Henry's return from abroad. Ah! it was then that she had made

the first false step! But even as she thought of it, she knew that she did not regret it. She had married without love — she had wronged him, albeit unwittingly and in ignorance; but, suppose they had parted — she told herself she would never have known the divine discontent of awakening love. No! better, far better, to have known its dawn, even if never for her should its full splendour be revealed.

And then she thought of her friends. Of Constance — who had known, and paid the price of knowledge. Of Roger Bolding, lying in a lonely grave under the far-off African sun. Only yesterday the post had brought her a letter from his servant, enclosing an envelope addressed to her in the bold handwriting with which she was familiar. The man stated that his master had desired him to post it in event of his death. It had been on him when he died, shot through the heart while seeking shelter for himself and a wounded comrade whom he carried in his arms. He had been buried where he fell. Inside the envelope was the half sheet of paper on which Eleanor had written the verse from Browning on that evening months ago, when their friendship was just beginning. That was all. No explanation, no comment. A message of encouragement from the grave. Eleanor had shed tears when first she saw it, but she could not weep for him now. Truly he had been one "who never turned his back, but marched breast

forward" — and he had given her his very best. As he himself had said, "A man's honest love never hurt a woman yet," and now he was gone — gone where sorrow and sighing shall be no more. She could not grieve for him.

She thought of old Lavender — of the lessons she had taught her, — Old Lavender, who, in spite of poverty, and sorrow, and loss, was ever hopeful, ever undaunted. She could almost hear the familiar voice chanting the favourite verse :—

> "Count your blessings, count them one by one;
> Count your blessings, see what God hath done."

Old Lavender, with the grim spectres of old age and want staring her in the face, shouldering the burden of two tiny, helpless babes, little blossoms from her tree of love; without a doubt, without a fear, trusting serenely in the Power which worketh all things together for good, to those that love Him.

Of Minnie, gay, light-hearted Minnie, who had learned her lesson, and was now secure and happy in her husband's love and trust.

Of Captain Maitland, who had been such a tower of strength to some of them in days of uncertainty and darkness.

Of Mildred and Jim, safe in the haven of their mutual affection; and of little Joan, the child to whom she had beome so devotedly attached, who was almost

like her own, — she drew her breath with a sob, — almost, not quite!

And lastly, and chiefly, she thought of her husband, and her home, his unfailing courtesy, his undoubted power of intellect, and his absorption in his work. It was true, she reflected, that latterly he had spent very little time in his library. Was it possible that his books and his literary labours were losing their interest for him? Surely that could never be. No; no doubt, in his kindness, he had wished to join in the general rejoicing, and assist in the preparations which had preceded the wedding. Now, no doubt, he was thoroughly enjoying a period of undisturbed quiet to pursue his own occupations with renewed vigour.

She pictured him seated at his table, in the light of the shaded lamp. She had placed a vase of flowers there only yesterday morning — could it have been only yesterday? By to-morrow they would have faded, and she would not be there to replace them; and although she had anticipated with pleasure spending a few weeks here with Joan, she felt now that she only wanted to get home again. After all, what had she to complain of? She had more — far more — than most women: a beautiful home, no sordid cares such as burden many lives, and a husband who treated her with perfect — if distant — kindness. She had said to Miss Price that there was nothing for her to

do but to go on, and already she found herself looking forward to 'going on' in a very different spirit. She had been unutterably foolish, she told herself, and in striving for happiness beyond her reach had failed to grasp the many joys which surrounded her on every side. She would begin again, quite afresh — and spend no more time in crying for the moon.

But even as she thus bravely resolved, the thought of the afternoon when they had driven together through the tumult and the storm, of the evening which had followed, — of the emotions which she had felt, — overwhelmed her like a wave. Again she felt the cutting force of the wind against her face, the strength of the arm which had encircled her for one brief, ecstatic moment, the word half uttered rang again in her ears, — and then the utter loneliness and desolation of the hours which had followed. Of what use was her newly found courage now? Of what use her newly formed resolutions? They disappeared like morning mist before the sun, at the mere recollection of her longing and her desire. She sank back in her seat, and, half crouching in the angle of the wall, pressed her hands to her face to stay the tears which rose to her eyes.

At this moment Monsieur Daudet, who had been to all appearances wrapped in dreamless slumber, sat up, and gave a shrill and joyful bark, and in another moment he had flung himself like a wild and woolly

whirlwind upon a man who was advancing out of the shadows. Eleanor raised herself, but before she had time to collect her thoughts, and bring them back to the present, a hand was laid on her shoulder, and a familiar voice said, —

"Eleanor!"

She passed her hand across her eyes as if to brush away a dream.

"Henry!" she said doubtfully. Then, coming to full recollection of herself and her circumstances, "Is anything the matter? Are you ill?"

Sir Henry sat down beside her.

"No, no," he said soothingly. "I am not ill. Every one, so far as I know, is perfectly well. Do not distress yourself. I came to see you."

"To see me?" faltered Eleanor.

"Yes! to see you, and to ask you of your kindness to listen to something I have to tell you."

His voice was quiet, almost cold, with the feeling he was sternly repressing, but Eleanor knew nothing of this, and her heart sank at his tone. Had he come to tell her he was going away?

"You are not going away?" she asked, with a gasp, regretting the words as soon as they were spoken.

"No!" he replied. "At least — not unless you send me! Listen! I have come to make a confession, and to ask for pardon. When we married, my love for you was — not dead, but —" he hesitated

for a choice of words, — "but worthless — although I did not know it at the time. I was entirely taken up with my own thoughts — my own aspirations. I allowed myself to drift on the stream of circumstances in crass and revolting selfishness. But now — I have come for pardon! I have come to tell you that I love you deeply, truly;" he was holding both her hands in his, and he leaned forward to see her face, which was hidden from him. "Can you forgive me, — Eleanor? I am yours! yours utterly — to do what you will with. Without you, life is nothing to me. With you — it might be — Heaven! Eleanor! Shall we start afresh, you and I? Speak to me, dearest. Forgive me! Tell me — have you any love for me?" He dropped her hand, and flung his arm round her. "I want you," he said, speaking in a low tone, vibrant with feeling. "Shall I tell you? When we married — in my stupidity and selfishness — you know how it was; then — when I began to feel something of what you might be to me — when I began to love you — I would not take anything you could not give me of your own free will. Then — Oh! Eleanor, forgive me! I thought — you cared for Bolding — and my newly found joy lay in ruins! Now I think I was wrong. Was I wrong, dear heart?"

Eleanor nodded; she could not speak; and he continued: —

"I should never have doubted you — but who could

have blamed you if another had stolen the precious thing I was too engrossed to value, then? Now! if you can give me any love — even a little, dearest! you shall see how I will prize it!"

"Oh, not a little!" she said brokenly. "Not a little, for all my heart is yours!"

He drew her closer and closer to his embrace.

"Nell!" he murmured passionately. "My dear, dear wife!"

Eleanor raised her face to his — and their lips met. The moments passed unheeded. Who shall mark the flight of Time, when two hearts reach that highest point of ecstasy permitted to poor mortals here below — a point where surely earth and heaven touch for a while, and radiance, wholly divine, encircles all.

At last Monsieur Daudet, having vainly tried to attract their attention by fidgeting and yawning, jumped up, to intimate that the cold asphalt was but a poor substitute for a warm blanket, and he wanted his comfortable basket.

"Come, sweetheart!" said Sir Henry, raising Eleanor as he spoke. "It is getting chilly for you. Tell me!" he cried suddenly, "will you come away with me — just you and I — our honeymoon, Nell?"

"But Joan?" she queried, smiling.

"We will telegraph to Minnie. She and Hugh can come down; I am sure the sea air would do him good. We will go to-morrow! just you and I, dear

wife! Shall it be so? Will you come?" he asked fondly.

Eleanor leaned against his supporting arm.

"To the ends of the earth," she whispered. "So that we are together!"

"Always together! God grant it! Always together!" he answered tenderly. "My dear, dear love!"

And so they passed home; for where two loving hearts are united, there is home.

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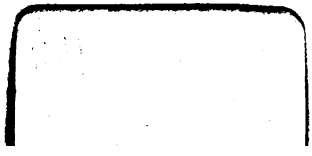
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